

Framing Identity: Nonprofit Messaging and the Politics of Latinidad



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Lilly Roth-Shapiro
Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island
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Primary Thesis Advisor: Margaret Weir
Secondary Thesis Advisor: Ieva Jusionyte
Honors Seminar Instructor: Nicole Pangborn

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Margaret Weir, Thesis Advisor

Date 04/09/2025



Ieva Jusionyte, Second Reader

Date 04/09/2025

Approved by

Professor Nicole Pangborn
Director, IAPA Honors Program

Date: April 17, 2025

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ABSTRACT

Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States. As the population grows, it also continues to diversify along the lines of citizenship, nationality, politics, class, and education. In this thesis, I examine how and why advocacy nonprofits have shifted their messaging around Latino identity over time, and what their issue priorities reveal about their assumptions regarding Latino political preferences. Through a text analysis of Instagram posts from two organizations—the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and Voto Latino—I find that MALDEF emphasizes the dangers and challenges facing Latinos in the US, while Voto Latino highlights the contributions of Latinos to the country through optimistic narratives about civic engagement. This study illuminates the broader process of ethnoracial identity construction in America and offers insights for advocacy nonprofits working to represent and mobilize Latinos in an increasingly polarized political landscape.

Keywords: Latino identity, communication strategies, immigration, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), Voto Latino

Cover Image: author's personal image from a DACA protest in Los Angeles, 2017

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION — LATINOS AND THE ADVOCACY NONPROFIT LANDSCAPE

The 2024 general election that returned Donald Trump to the White House sparked a national discussion in which Latino voters played a prominent role. A “seismic shift” of more than 20 points to the right among Latinos in some states dominated headlines, fueling narratives suggesting they had delivered Trump’s victory.¹ Latinos are a large group that continues to grow in population and diversity. This political reality poses major questions for the leaders of identity-based advocacy nonprofits aiming to represent Latinos. In this thesis, I examine how these organizations have navigated the challenges of appealing to an increasingly heterogeneous population, and I situate them within the larger historical construction of Latino identity in the United States. I use two organizations (The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and Voto Latino) as case studies to ask how their communication strategies have evolved over time, and how they use particular political issues to try to resonate with and mobilize Latinos.

Today, Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, at 19.1 percent of the total population and 63.7 million people in 2022 (about twice the population of Texas).² This is a huge uptick from 1980, when just seven percent of the population was Latino. In 2020, 42.6 million Latinos were US-born, compared to the foreign-born population of 19.9 million.

¹ Montanaro, Domenico. “In This Election, Demographics Did Not Determine How People Voted.” *NPR*, November 22, 2024, sec. 2024 Election.
<https://www.npr.org/2024/11/22/nx-s1-5199119/2024-election-exit-polls-demographics-black-latino-voter>; Lange, Jason, Bo Erickson, Brad Heath, and Brad Heath. “Trump’s Return to Power Fueled by Hispanic, Working-Class Voter Support.” *Reuters*, November 7, 2024, sec. United States.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-return-power-fueled-by-hispanic-working-class-voter-support-2024-11-06/>.

² Census Bureau, “Hispanic Heritage Month: 2023,” United States Census Bureau, Census Bureau, August 17, 2023,
<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2023/hispanic-heritage-month.html>.

Seventy-eight percent of people in this group had been in the US for over ten years at the time of survey.

The demographics of the American Latino population have changed significantly over the years. For most of the twentieth century, the predominant groups were Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, and each group was concentrated in distinct parts of the country: Mexicans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in New York, and Cubans in Florida. However, today, the number of Mexican immigrants has fallen at the same time as the nation has seen rapid growth from Central American countries: while the Venezuelan population expanded by 169 percent from 2010 to 2021, Mexican growth slowed to 13 percent. However, the Mexican-origin population still had the largest increase in people (4.3 million) in that same period. Mexicans remain the largest national-origin population at 37.2 million, followed by Puerto Ricans (5.8 million), Salvadorans (2.5 million), Dominicans (2.4 million), and Cubans (2.4 million). Salvadoran and Dominican national-origin groups have displaced Cubans as the third and fourth most populous Latin American nationalities in the US.

Immigrants are becoming a smaller proportion of the Latino population as a result of US births outpacing new arrivals. Between 2010 and 2021, the US-born population increased by 10.7 million, while the number of new immigrants totaled at 1.1 million. The concentration of Latinos by national origin varies across large metropolitan areas. In Midwest, West, and South—in metropolitans like Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston—the Latino populations tend to be mostly Mexican. Miami and Orlando are exceptions to this, where Cubans and Puerto Ricans are the dominant group, respectively. The Northeast is more heterogeneous: in New York City and Boston, no single group comprises more than 30 percent of the Latino population.³ In terms of politics, 60 percent of Latinos said the Democratic Party represents the interests of

³ Moslimani, Hugo Lopez, and Noe-Bustamante.

people like them, while 34 percent said this of the Republican Party in 2022. This contrasts with the more even split among the broader adult population (47 percent Democrat and 44 percent Republican).⁴

All of these broader demographic shifts have impacted trends in religious affiliation. Young, US-born Latinos have been driving the population's growth since the 2000s. Nearly 80 percent of those aged 18 to 29 were born in the US, and half of this age group is not affiliated with religion, compared to just one fifth of Latinos over 50 (most of this group was not born in the US).⁵ Just over 40 percent of Latinos say they are Catholic, and 21 percent are Protestant. Among Latino Catholics, 34 percent are conservative and 28 percent are liberal; Latino Protestants are 38 percent conservative and 26 percent liberal; and Latinos who are unaffiliated with religion are 23 percent conservative and 45 percent liberal.⁶ Religious affiliation may shape political beliefs, and the plurality of religious affiliation among Latinos complicates any attempt to categorize Latinos as a monolithic political bloc. Along national origin, geographic concentration, political, and religious lines, Latinos are a diverse group.

What does this diversity and growth mean for the advocacy organizations that are trying to serve and represent Latinos? As Trump has elevated the national political discourse on immigration, seeking to instill fear and marginalize Latino immigrants and US-born citizens alike, how have identity-based advocacy organizations responded? In the current political

⁴ Jens Manuel Krogstad, Khadijah Edwards, and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Hispanics' Views of the U.S. Political Parties," *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 29, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2022/09/29/hispanics-views-of-the-u-s-political-parties/>.

⁵ Jens Manuel Krogstad and Joshua Alvarado, "Among U.S. Latinos, Catholicism Continues to Decline but Is Still the Largest Faith," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 13, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latinos-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/>.

⁶ Paul Taylor et al., "Politics, Values and Religion," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 4, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2012/04/04/v-politics-values-and-religion/>.

landscape, what is the role of these organizations in the work of defining and altering public understandings of Latino identity?

The Emergence of a Panethnic Identity

The United States Census has been central to the creation and mainstreaming of a panethnic Latino identity category in the US. Terminology has shifted from “Mexican,” to “Hispanic,” to “Latino,” to “Latinx,” and “Latine.” Latino stakeholders—from politicians to community organizers and media executives—and the US government are some of the key actors in these developments, dating back to the first half of the twentieth century. In 1930, Census officials added a “Mexican” racial category, marking a shift in the conceptualization of Mexicans’ race (previously they had been legally categorized as white—though socially categorized and stigmatized as nonwhite). This category was born from a desire to restrict immigration from Mexico in the wake of the Mexican Revolution by counting and capping the Mexican population.⁷ Groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) immediately pushed back against this decision. They felt the “Mexican” category negated the privileges of white status secured through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which granted citizenship and property rights to Mexicans in the US. They also argued that this would make Mexicans more vulnerable to racism and discrimination.⁸ All this backlash resulted in the removal of the “Mexican” racial category from the 1940 Census.

However, this only marked the beginning of the government’s—and Latino interest and advocacy groups’—efforts to categorize and count a growing population. The 1950 Census included a “Spanish Surname” category, but only for the Southwest and Northeast (where the

⁷ Dowling, Julie A. *Mexican Americans and the Question of Race*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.7560/754010>.

⁸ Mora, 133.

majority of the Latino population was concentrated at the time), and the 1960 Census features a “Spanish Speaking” sample question. By the 1960s, the cultural and political contexts of the Civil Rights Movement invigorated Latinos to form organizations focused on the issues of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans (the largest Latino populations at the time). These organizations would begin to call for an embrace of panethnicity and create a “national ‘Hispanic’ lobby.”⁹ Advocacy groups quickly realized that Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans were underrepresented, and that without concrete data and numbers, it would be nearly impossible to hold political power or influence and thus would be challenging to address any issues facing these groups. This realization led figures in organizations like the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and MALDEF to advocate for a distinction between whites and Latinos, which came to fruition with the 1980 Census question on “Hispanic/Spanish Origin.”

The terminology has shifted significantly over time, reflecting the complexity of trying to categorize and make legible a group that is not uniform across most metrics (country of origin, citizenship status, length of time lived in the US, race, class, partisanship, etc.). The Census category has always been under the umbrella of ethnicity (not race): Respondents who affirm they are “Hispanic/Spanish-origin” also must mark an additional response to indicate their race (choosing one of 13 options or writing in under “Some Other Race”). In his first term, President Donald Trump’s administration rejected a proposal for a combined race and ethnicity question for the Census (which would have increased minority response rates) and also proposed adding a citizenship question (which would decrease minority response rates). These decisions were meant to undermine the empirical data on minority groups and the issues they face in order to

⁹ Mora.

undercut the ability of minority rights advocates to utilize data to secure appropriate and necessary resources. In effect, these actions would weaken Latino political power.¹⁰

In addition to population growth and questions about measuring the group, political discussion about immigration affects Latino as well. Immigration—and with it, race—have become more polarizing topics under President Trump’s terms in office. His use of racist and xenophobic rhetoric works to link a criminalized view of immigration with race and ethnicity, making anyone who could be perceived as Latino vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The ramifications of Trump’s presidencies have been felt in the rhetoric and sentiment of American politics, affecting not just immigrants but US-born Latinos, too.¹¹ There was a 226 percent rise in hate crimes in counties where Trump rallies took place during his 2016 campaign, and in 2019, the FBI announced that anti-Latino crimes rose more than 21 percent in 2018.¹²

In 2018, under President Donald Trump, half of Latinos reported that their situation had worsened in the US since his election to office, with nearly half feeling seriously concerned about their place in American society as a result. Fifty-four percent shared it had become more difficult to be “Hispanic” in the US under Trump. Close to 40 percent experienced either discrimination or unfair treatment; criticism for speaking Spanish in public; were told to go back to their country of origin; or were called offensive names due to their identity. Even in light of all this, 97 percent of respondents remained proud of their heritage, and 84 percent said they were

¹⁰ Mora, 143.

¹¹ Patrick Kingsley, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe’s Refugee Crisis* (London: Guardian Books and Faber & Faber, 2017).

¹² Stephanie Canizales and Jody Agius Vallejo, “Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era,” *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 155, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48691409>.

also proud to be American.¹³ While a majority of the population is concerned with their position in the country, a larger majority is proud to be American, highlighting the complexity and nuance of Latino identity. These statistics and the results of the 2024 election raise new questions and challenges for identity-based organizations working to unify a collective Latino voice.

Nationwide, these organizations have continued in their efforts to defend and protect Latinos in the United States from discrimination. Historically, this work has often meant that groups in this space have been key actors in shaping the national understanding and definition of Latino identity. In this way, Latino identity becomes a political tool used by various actors for varying purposes. While playing a role in shaping public notions of identity, these advocacy organizations also shape their work based on the interests of the groups they aim to represent. My research questions seek to uncover these dynamics and speak to broader questions of ethnoracial identity construction in America.

Existing Literature and the Gap in the Conversation

I address a gap in the existing literature by looking at the challenges of an increasingly diverse Latino population from the perspective of the organizations that aim to represent them. Sociologists and political scientists have traced the creation of panethnic identity categories over time and have presented divergent theories explaining how identity is crafted. Some argue that negotiations between state and nonstate actors resulted in Latino as a category. Others see it as progressive development that can be explained by sociohistorical processes. Still others argue Latino identity is an amalgamation of group experiences which is then used to advance political or organizational agendas. In this view, organizations shape identity by tailoring how they

¹³ Mark Hugo Lopez, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Jens Manuel Krogstad, “More Latinos Have Serious Concerns About Their Place in America Under Trump,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 25, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2018/10/25/more-latinos-have-serious-concerns-about-their-place-in-america-under-trump/>.

communicate about identity to who they want to serve.¹⁴ The idea that Latino identity is created by explicit organizational strategy is in tension with scholars who see it as a result of broader historical and circumstantial forces.¹⁵

While scholars have looked at the development of Latino identity in the United States historically, there is less work on how these changes have been negotiated by identity-based nonprofits: how it has shaped the language they use and the issue areas they prioritize. I seek to bridge the historical accounts to the present day and unpack—through two case studies and a review of existing literature—the complexities that panethnic Latino identity poses for organizations. This project, then, reframes and examines scholarly understanding of Latino identity, nonprofit organizations, and their use of language around identity.

Significance

I study how identity-based advocacy nonprofits select language and issue areas related to Latino identity. This work seeks to inform a deeper understanding of how Latino identity is used as a political tool, and how different terminology and language is used to describe Latino identity.

I hope to provide takeaways for identity-based nonprofits in this field. Understanding how organizations present Latino identity—through language and issue areas—will shed light on their role in the wider production of Latino identity. More broadly, I hope to contribute to the understanding of the development and role of race and ethnicity in America.

¹⁴ Benjamin Marquez, “Choosing Issues, Choosing Sides: Constructing Identities in Mexican-American Social Movement Organizations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2001): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870020023427>.

¹⁵ David A. Badillo, “MALDEF and the Evolution of Latino Civil Rights,” *Research Reports: A Series of Papers by the Institute for Latino Studies and Research Associates* 5 (January 2005), https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/MALDEF_and_the_Evolution_of_Latino_Civil_Rights/24855924?backTo=%2Fcollections%2FInstitute_for_Latino_Studies_Sponsored_Research_and_Publications_Archive%2F7003245&file=43732806.

Research Questions

How and why have these nonprofits changed how they communicate about Latino identity over time? What do the issue areas they focus on reveal about the assumptions the organizations have about the needs and political preferences of their target audiences? What do these practices tell us about the construction of ethnoracial identity in America?

Cases and Justification

I examine two nonprofit organizations—the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and Voto Latino—in a comparative case analysis. I have selected these organizations for several reasons. First, they are representative of the changes in language around identity over time in different ways. Second, they are well-established, national organizations in the field with wide-reaching impact. Third, looking at different types of nonprofit organizations (a legal defense fund and a civic engagement group) provides a more holistic view of the field. Both organizations have a 501(c)(3) designation, meaning that they are prohibited from supporting or opposing political candidates and must remain nonpartisan in any advocacy efforts.¹⁶ Voto Latino is a dual 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) nonprofit, meaning it is granted more flexibility in terms of advocacy and lobbying than a 501(c)(3) group.¹⁷

MALDEF is a legal defense fund that has been around since 1968. It was established in Texas and now has offices in Los Angeles (its national headquarters), Sacramento, San Antonio, Chicago, and Washington, DC. It operates as a national organization with regional offices. I am interested in the discrepancy between the use of “Mexican American” in the name, and the fact that all of the organization’s communications utilize “Latino” rather than “Mexican American.”

¹⁶ Watson, Nadia. “501c3 and 501c4 Permissible Activities Comparison,” n.d.

¹⁷ 501(c)(4) status describes social welfare groups, while 501(c)(3)’s are for religious, charitable, scientific, and educational purposes. This designation means that Voto Latino is allowed to engage in some partisan activity so long as it is not the main purpose of its work.

MALDEF focuses on legal issues related to education, employment, immigrants' rights, voting rights, access to justice, and freedom from open and obvious bias and racism. In addition to working in the courts, MALDEF engages in educational work (i.e., through informational social media campaigns). The long history of the organization provides an opportunity to trace the sociohistorical forces shaping Latino identity over time and examine how one organization chose to negotiate these changes. Additionally, I am interested in the nature of the organization as a legal defense fund—it primarily operates as a pro bono law firm, which shapes and limits the political dimensions of the group.

Voto Latino was established in 2004, meaning it is relatively new compared to MALDEF. The national organization headquartered in Washington, DC explicitly outlines its mission as seeking to mobilize and engage millennial Latinos, in contrast with MALDEF's guiding purpose.¹⁸ I selected this organization to illustrate how different organizations might seek out distinct generations and age groups, and in turn, how this might affect their communication strategies. Voto Latino's website includes terms like "Latinx" and "Latine," which do not appear in any of MALDEF's organizational language.

Method and Justification

I examine my two case study organizations through a text analysis. I study these two organizations to understand how nonprofits in this space have shifted their communication strategies and issue priorities over time.

I conduct a text analysis of the organizations' Instagram posts to get a sense of their communication strategies as they relate to Latino identity. I analyze the language (identity terminology, political issues mentioned, and emotional tone) used by each organization to understand how communication strategies may differ across organizations and over time. I look

¹⁸ Voto Latino. "About Voto Latino." <https://votolatino.org/about/>.

at election years 2016, 2020, and 2024 in my analysis. Much of MALDEF's work surrounds educational rights, DACA (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was launched by President Obama in 2012 and provides temporary protection from deportation for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the US as children), and immigration status, and Voto Latino has significant DACA content on its website as well. Two thousand and sixteen will highlight Trump's first election and increased national discussion on immigration and race. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement featured prominently in both organizations' Instagram posts and inspired a lot of messages about solidarity. Finally, 2024 will provide a glimpse into another election year, challenges to DACA's legality, a second Trump presidency, and will be the most recent full year that can be analyzed.

I am interested in understanding how the diversification of Latinos along various demographic lines poses challenges for organizations working to unite the group around a particular issue set and a common panethnic identity. Looking at these three years will ground my analysis of how each nonprofit uses language about identity and what issues it chooses to emphasize within the contemporary moments most relevant to Latino identity in politics.

In terms of methods, I manually code the Instagram posts on MALDEF's (@Maldefian) and Voto Latino's Instagram accounts (@VotoLatino) from each relevant year, as well as MALDEF's press releases from 2016 (in place of Instagram posts, since it did not have an active account then). I use Python and NVivo 15 to collect and analyze my corpus. I develop a code list that correlates to my research questions. After narrowing my sample in order to feasibly conduct a qualitative analysis, I code my texts.

This methodology allows me to situate this project within the broader context of the historical developments around Latino identity over time and understand how particular

organizations have shifted their messaging over time in order to shed light on the construction of ethnoracial identity in the United States.

It is important to note that this was an iterative process, rather than a straightforward progression. While developing my codebook, I moved back and forth between coding for searchable terms and phrases, identifying bigger-picture ideas, and reading through my corpus many times. As I coded, additional salient ideas sometimes emerged, moving me back through this cyclical process.

Thesis Roadmap

Following this introductory chapter, I structure my thesis as follows. Chapter two will provide a literature review, presenting the relevant theoretical frameworks and scholarly discussions to ground this project. It will also lay out the gaps in existing knowledge that my research will address. Chapter three will focus on MALDEF, reviewing its history as an organization and my text analysis findings. Chapter four will be similar in structure, but focused on my second case study, Voto Latino. I will also address the history of the organization and my data analysis and draw comparisons between the two case study organizations. Finally, the fifth chapter will serve as a comparative analysis between the two organizations and will conclude by outlining limitations and future implications.

CHAPTER TWO: MAKING SENSE OF LATINO IDENTITY — KEY DEBATES

In order to address the research questions I pose, it is necessary to provide historical and conceptual grounding in three perspectives: first, historical changes and how various actors and institutions have made sense of the increasingly diverse and changing Latino population over time. Second, an analysis of what this history has meant for Latino identity and political behavior, both at the group and individual level. Finally, I explore how organizations—specifically, identity-based advocacy nonprofits—navigate the challenges presented in the first two sections of the chapter. A review of these three perspectives will set the stage by grounding my research questions in the existing scholarship and also highlighting the gaps in knowledge that I will then seek to address in subsequent chapters.

Making Sense of a Diverse and Changing Group

Scholars have theorized about how race and ethnicity have been constructed in the United States over time and what broad forces have been at play in this process. Both official channels (like the Census) and scholars have grappled with the meaning and implications of Latino identity. There are many disagreements in the field, from the definition of and terminology used to describe Latino identity to its role in US politics. In national conversation, Latinos are often discussed in terms of political power, commonly described as a growing group with untapped potential as a panethnic voting bloc. This section explores these broader debates about Latino identity: its historical formation, the actors and institutions involved in these processes, and public opinion preferences for different terminology.

The Census

The US Census has had a prominent role in determining and categorizing Latino identity and its boundaries, which in turn have shaped political, social, and economic spheres of life. The

Census has categorized Latinos differently in terms of race and ethnicity over time. As discussed in chapter one, the conquering of parts of Mexico in 1848 and Puerto Rico in 1898 led to the social constructions of those populations as white, enabling them to be eligible for citizenship. However, this designation was largely for Census and statistical purposes, as outlined by scholars like Cristina Beltrán, Nilda Flores-González, and Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz. Their works highlight the liminal, middle-zone space of holding legal whiteness, while still being socially categorized as nonwhite and thus excluded.¹ In the early twentieth century, this began to shift. Culturally, there was a rise in rhetoric that framed immigration as a threat, resulting in the criminalization of individuals who were socially perceived as Latinos. Indeed, the Border Patrol and the start of border enforcement began in the 1920s.

Looking at the history of immigration-as-threat rhetoric allows us to better contextualize the current moment and to see how white feelings of threat have been transmitted through this type of rhetoric. After World War II there was a resurgence in Malthusian concerns about overpopulation, which continued throughout the 1970s, when this concern became attached to issues of “illegal” immigration from Mexico.² The politics of Donald Trump and the far right today exemplify the legacy of this discourse. Sociologists Stephanie Canizales and Jody Vallejo identify the phenomenon of white *demographobia*, which they define as the feeling of white

¹ Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens but Not Americans: Race and Belonging Among Latino Millennials*, Latina/o Sociology (New York: NYU Press, 2017): 11, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1497338&site=ehost-live&scope=site&authtype=ip.sso&custid=rock>.

² Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future: Latino Civil Rights and the Politics of Demographic Change*, Gale eBooks (Princeton: University Press, 2021): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691205908>.

people that they are “under siege by growing racial/ethnic diversity.”³ This perception can foster xenophobia rhetoric, which has serious implications for Latinos and other marginalized groups.

The construction of immigration as an impending threat has been tied to the US-Mexico border, and by extension, to Mexicans and Latinos more broadly. Daniel Hopkins, a political scientist, looks at how different national and local conditions shape depictions of immigrants as threatening. He argues that when demographic changes are happening and immigration is prominent in national rhetoric, immigrants are more vulnerable to political targeting and hostilities at the local level.⁴ Narratives concerning “floods” of immigrants, along with an increased focus on population statistics, have been critically examined in works like political scientist Paula McClain and her colleagues. They argue that group membership—the assignment of an individual to a group based on a set of characteristics—has been reified and codified by institutions like US courts and the Census.⁵ Sociologist Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz writes that it is not possible to understand Latino population politics without the context of the constant concern about and attention to potential white reaction.⁶ These authors underscore how numbers—through mechanisms like the Census—can spur white American fear, which may be translated into anti-immigrant rhetoric with concrete implications for Latinos, both as individuals and as a political group.

³ Stephanie L. Canizales and Jody Agius Vallejo, “Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era,” *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 151.

⁴ Daniel J. Hopkins, “Politicized Places: Explaining Where and When Immigrants Provoke Local Opposition,” *American Journal of Political Science* 104, no. 1 (2010): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055409990360>.

⁵ Paula D. McClain et al., “Group Membership, Group Identity, and Group Consciousness: Measures of Racial Identity in American Politics?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. Volume 12, 2009 (June 15, 2009): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.102452>.

⁶ Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 203.

The Census looms large in the historical construction of a panethnic Latino category and underscores the ties between numerical and political strength in US politics. Building on the history noted in chapter one, in 2000, the Census Bureau added the category “Hispanic” as an ethnicity and counted more than 35 million Latinos.⁷ The decision to categorize “Hispanic” as an ethnic group was the result of negotiations between political actors, rather than an intentional choice. As noted earlier, the Census had for a long time counted Latinos as white, and officials were thus concerned with creating a new racial category for Latinos that would mean fewer whites.⁸ Making “Hispanic” an ethnicity was seen as the most logistically simple solution and would not require expanding beyond the five races listed on the Census: white, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Understanding how these racial and ethnic categories were decided upon emphasizes their constructed nature and allows us to critically interrogate them and address my research questions.

These questions are front and center in American politics today. In 2000, “Some Other Race” (SOR) was added as a sixth option on the Census for respondents who did not identify with any of the other five racial categories. These changes addressed the rising number of SOR respondents, which is largely tied to the Latino population’s inability to easily report identities in the separate race question. Between 2010 and 2020, the SOR category increased by 129 percent, surpassing the Black population (46.9 million) at 49.9 million. Testing showed that a combined race/ethnicity question would alleviate this statistical issue and lower the percentage of SOR and missing responses. Advocates have asserted the necessity of these changes because inaccurate counts can render communities, such as Latinos, “invisible in the data” and affect access to social

⁷ D’Vera Cohn, “Census History: Counting Hispanics,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 3, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2010/03/03/census-history-counting-hispanics-2/>.

⁸ Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 48.

services and supports. The Biden administration made significant strides toward improving the United States Census, which is conducted every ten years, in time for the 2030 count. These proposed changes under Biden combined the separate race and ethnicity questions to a joint single race/ethnicity question. This new question allows respondents to select one or multiple categories to indicate their identity. Crucially, a single response like “Hispanic” or “Latino” would be considered a complete response. As of now, this new race/ethnicity question will appear in the 2030 Census. These developments can be tied to the broader history of identity construction in this country I briefly outline above, and the Census serves as a record of how terminology has evolved over the years and how organizations have negotiated these changes.

The Scholarly Debate: Latinos, Race, and Ethnicity

Scholars approach the question of Latino identity from different perspectives and disagree on how to categorize it: is it a race, ethnicity, panethnicity, or ethnorace? And what are the implications of each? This section outlines the key works in this field that argue for different categorizations of Latino identity, underscoring the complexities of unifying such a diverse group of people under one identity-based term.

Rodríguez-Muñiz and Canizales and Vallejo place race at the forefront of these considerations. Rodríguez-Muñiz views race as a political relation and “modern colonial practice of classification... anchored in the ideological and material division between Europeanness and non-Europeanness.”⁹ He posits population as a tool used by colonialism to naturalize race—“demographic knowledge... as a form of racial knowledge.”¹⁰ Through this lens, race is the backbone of all social categorization and *Latinidad* (“Latinness”) fits into this nexus. Canizales and Vallejo also view Latinos as part of a racial category, whereby the lumping of

⁹ Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 8.

¹⁰ Rodríguez-Muñiz, 8.

diverse groups under one umbrella term has resulted in the racialization of Latinos and has shaped both public perceptions of Latinos, as well as their own views on their place in society.¹¹

Sociologist Nilda Flores-González builds on the idea of *Latinidad* as race, suggesting it is a context-dependent label informed by the functions of race in US society. She theorizes that “current racial ideas and practices impact the ways in which this group understands race, makes meaning of lived experiences as racialized subjects, and develops racialized notions of belonging that are marked by racial exclusion.”¹² Here, race is the principle organizing force in American society, despite its nature as a socially constructed category. Thus, Flores-González sees Latino identity as a contextual thing that changes depending on the actors and institutions involved (i.e., who is asking about one’s identity and how they are asking about it).¹³ Though these analyses center race as the principle organizing mechanism for understanding Latino identity, others return to the question of race versus ethnicity and come to different conclusions.

Sociologist G. Cristina Mora broadens the scope to consider the distinction drawn between race and ethnicity in the Census. She argues two things: first, that *Latinidad* is an ethnicity and not a race, and so individual Latinos can belong to different racial groups. Opponents of this view claim that Latino identity is inherently racially mixed and thus a race itself. The second piece is that the separation of race and ethnicity on the Census implies that they are conceptually discrete, meaning that proponents of an ethnoracial understanding of

¹¹ Canizales and Vallejo, “Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era”: 156.

¹² Flores-González, *Citizens but Not Americans*, 2.

¹³ Flores-González, 52.

Latinidad would reject a two-question format that separates race and ethnicity into distinct questions.¹⁴

Sociologists Dina Okamoto and Mora, on the other hand, posit Latino identity as a panethnic category, meaning a collection of distinct ethnic groups who fall under the broader label of “Latino.” They review panethnicity as it relates to various populations and describe it as the tensions that arise from balancing diverse subgroup interests while simultaneously maintaining solidarity and a unified front. They elevate diversity as an inherent and necessary element for long-term success in panethnic groups.¹⁵ They highlight debates around the “Hispanic” Census category and whether it arose from the statistical desires of Census officials or the interactions and advocacy of non-state actors and organizations with the government in a sort of compromise. This view centers ethnic rather than racial difference as an organizing force, in contrast to the scholars mentioned previously, and acknowledges the various ethnicities that make up the larger, constructed, panethnic group.

Political theorist Cristina Beltrán upholds but pushes back against Latinidad as panethnicity. She proposes the preeminence of Latino as a category and identity as the result of a change over time (a “sociohistorical process”) in which groups have been umbrellaed under the larger Latino label, leading to assumptions about shared identity and cultural consciousness.¹⁶ She argues that the diversity within the population should not be overlooked in the uptake of a sweeping panethnic category that puts forth a vision of united political and policy interests, and

¹⁴ G. Cristina Mora, “Latinx Politics and the Census in the Trump Era,” in *Trumpism and Its Discontents*, ed. Osagie K. Obasogie (Regents of the University of California, n.d.): 135.

¹⁵ Dina Okamoto and G. Cristina Mora, “Panethnicity,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2014): 219–39, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043201>.

¹⁶ Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 4.

that there must be recognition of Latino identity as “historically and discursively constructed.”¹⁷ While this is a good framework for thinking about Latino politics, Beltrán’s critique advances a view of how things hypothetically could be. In other words, it is slightly removed from the reality that race and ethnicity are central to American politics, and that racial identities are politically salient. However, both can be true: Latino identity can be invoked in politics without downplaying Latino diversity or projecting imagery of a unified political front. Latino identity can be seen as a lens individuals use to make sense of politics, even if there is not an overall political cohesion across all Latinos. Beltrán posits Latino identity as a fundamentally constructed category which has led to assumptions about communal behavior, underscoring the challenge of unifying a group of people seen to hold the same cultural values but who may have opposing political views and agendas.

While the literature so far has conceptualized Latino identity as a race, ethnicity, and panethnicity, some scholars claim it is an ethnoracial category, collapsing the line between race and ethnicity as mutually exclusive categories. The term ethnoracial combines both ethnic and racial groups and is used to describe groups that may not be summed up by a single race or ethnicity alone. Latinos are often placed under the ethnoracial category, as there are many ethnic characteristics of the group, but the nature of Latino existence in the US is a racialized one. Flores-González interviews Latino millennials about how they see themselves in terms of identity and positionality in the US. She finds that most employ an ethnoracial categorization composed of cultural and racial characteristics, and that panethnic language has “taken on racial meaning as Latinos increasingly use them as stand-ins for race,” challenging boundaries of what

¹⁷ Beltrán, 9.

constitutes race and ethnicity in the US.¹⁸ Her work centers individual experiences to highlight broader questions about identity and how it operates at both the individual and group levels.

Similarly, Jonathan Rosa, a linguistic anthropologist, is interested in how Latinos have been positioned in relation to race and ethnicity over time, as both categories relate to belonging—ethnic difference allows for class mobility and the possibility of legitimization as American (as seen with Italians and Irish, for example), while racial difference less fluid, is positioned as antithetical to the country, and is the basis for the questioning of one’s belonging.¹⁹ To center the relationship between these categories, he uses the term *ethnoracial* in his work. Finally, his concept of *ethnoracial contortions* highlights the contextual nature of Latino identity. In this framework, “becoming and unbecoming” Latino is understood as “multidimensional processes that demonstrate the linkages between diaspora, national (be)longing, and institutional experiences of difference.”²⁰ Scholars like Flores-González and Rosa see the fluid nature of Latino identity as a reflection of broader US power relations that get expressed through race and ethnicity and thus use *ethnoracial* as a signifier.

All of these scholars’ works are useful for thinking about how Latino identity has come to be defined over time, and how to navigate the nature of constructed identity categories while also acknowledging their very real, day-to-day ramifications.

Public Opinion

In addition to differences in how Latino identity is conceptualized and categorized, there are debates around the very language used to describe the group of people who are ascribed to

¹⁸ Flores-González, *Citizens but Not Americans*, 52.

¹⁹ Jonathan Rosa, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*, Oxford Studies in the Anthropology of Language (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 20, <https://academic.oup.com/book/5538>.

²⁰ Rosa, 72.

the Latino category. This section tracks public opinion around identity-based terminology over time. The most common labels are “Hispanic” and “Latino,” which originated in the 1970s and the 1990s, respectively. “Latino” was advanced as an alternative to what critics saw as a colonial term that privileged Spain above Latin American countries.

“Latinx” has become another label to describe the population in recent decades. It was coined in the early 2000s and was more popular in higher education institutions but rose in prominence after the Pulse nightclub shooting in June 2016 in Orlando, Florida, an attack that took place at the LGBTQ+ club’s Latin Night. After this, more queer Latinos began to use “Latinx” as a political statement and expression of pride.²¹ As of 2024, nearly half of Latinos say they have heard of “Latinx,” an increase from the 23 percent who had in 2019. However, while awareness has increased, the percentage of people who self-identify as Latinx has not: just four percent (importantly, this is still 1.9 million people) say they use the term.²² Among those who have heard of “Latinx,” young Latinos between 18 and 29 (42 percent), college graduates (38 percent), and Latinos who mostly speak English (29 percent) are most likely to have heard of it.²³

A Pew Research poll found that a smaller percentage had heard of the term “Latine” (18 percent) compared to “Latinx.” When asked what terms they most use to describe themselves, over half of respondents selected “The term used to describe people of your heritage (i.e., Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.);” 30 percent chose “Hispanic, Latino, Latinx or Latine;” and 17

²¹ Katy Steinmetz, “Why ‘Latinx’ Is Succeeding While Other Gender-Neutral Terms Fail to Catch On,” TIME, April 2, 2018, <https://time.com/5191804/latinx-definition-meaning-latino-hispanic-gender-neutral/>.

²² Luis Noe-Bustamante, Martinez Gracie, and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Latinx Awareness Has Doubled Among U.S. Hispanics Since 2019, but Only 4% Use It,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/12/latinx-awareness-has-doubled-among-u-s-hispanics-since-2019-but-only-4-percent-use-it/>.

²³ Noe-Bustamante, Mora, and Hugo Lopez, “About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics.”

percent said American. In terms of describing the Latino population, 53 percent preferred “Hispanic;” 29 percent “Latino;” two percent “Latinx;” one percent “Latine;” and 15 percent had no preference.²⁴

Some critics argue that “Latinx” is an English word, as the “x” would not appear in a Spanish word, in a language with gendered words mostly ending in a masculine “o” or feminine “a.”²⁵ Proponents of the sentiment behind “Latinx” have offered “Latine” as an alternative that is more Spanish-centered yet still gender-inclusive. Opponents to “Latinx” argue that this term is alienating and stems from higher education institutions and elite spaces and therefore does not speak to the majority of the Latino population.

Finally, *Latinidad*, or “Latinness,” is a term that has been used by various scholars. Beltrán describes it as a sociohistorical process in which multiple Latin American national-origin groups “are understood as having a sense of collective identity and cultural consciousness.”²⁶ Flores-González articulates the communal sense of *Latinidad* that arises from the rise of panethnic labels in the national discourse and daily interactions that together lead to individuals adopting panethnic identity labels for themselves.²⁷ Rodríguez-Muñiz builds off of Beltrán in conceptualizing *Latinidad* as a verb—“something that must be done or enacted, and not as a

²⁴ Pew Research Center, Pew American Trends Panel Poll, Questions 61-67, 31120938.00060, Ipsos, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2023), Survey question, DOI: 10.25940/ROPER-31120938.

²⁵ Harmeet Kaur, “Why People Are Split on Using ‘Latinx,’” CNN, August 12, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/12/us/latinx-term-usage-hispanics-trnd/index.html>; Paulina Villegas et al., “How ‘Latinx’ United — and Divided — a Community Seeking to Redefine Itself,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/04/02/latinx-meaning-controversy-culture/>.

²⁶ Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*.

²⁷ Flores-González, *Citizens but Not Americans*, 17.

noun that signifies something that someone *is*”—and questions under what circumstances, for what purposes, and with what implications have different labels been employed.²⁸

These scholarly debates and divides in public opinion underscore the vast diversity of thought, politics, and personal preference that make up the Latino population in the United States.

Note on Labels

A project on the political and social implications of language requires a brief explanation of the terms I will use. I build on Rodríguez-Muñiz’s understanding of “Latino” as a term whose “meaning is not self-evident or universal” but “historical, political, and situational.”²⁹ I will use “Latino” in most cases, as it is a universally known and used term. While “Hispanic” is also popular—and in some studies, more popular overall than “Latino”—younger generations prefer “Latino.” Sixty-five percent of adults over 65 prefer “Hispanic,” while less than half (43 percent) of adults aged 18 to 29 prefer the term.³⁰ Additionally, in my analysis of MALDEF’s and Voto Latino’s Instagram posts, press releases, and annual reports, as well as interviews with employees of each organization, “Latino” was the most common term I encountered. The aim of this thesis is not to advance any particular term as correct or appropriate, but to look at when and under what circumstances organizations have employed different terms to describe Latino identity. When quoting from a source, I will use the language and terminology as it is written.

²⁸ Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 27.

²⁹ Rodríguez-Muñiz, 26.

³⁰ Luis Noe-Bustamante, Gracie Martinez, and Mark Hugo Lopez, “U.S. Hispanics’ Preferences Among Pan-Ethnic Terms,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/12/u-s-hispanics-preferences-among-pan-ethnic-terms/>.

To refer to the organizations I study, I will mostly use the term “identity-based advocacy organizations” and variations of this phrase. These terms build on political scientist Jeffrey Berry’s definition of public interest groups as organizations that intend to speak for large social and/or economic groups and advocate for resources that do not “selectively and materially benefit the membership and activists of the organization.”³¹

Identity and Political Behavior Among Latinos

This section reviews the literature concerning linked fate, group consciousness, their applications to Latinos, and different theories on how prominent Latinidad is in an individual’s politics. I explore these concepts and lay out the current scholarly landscape to demarcate where my own thesis comes into the picture. The Black experience in America has set the stage for understanding minority politics through concepts like group consciousness and linked fate. As a result, much of the literature on identity as it relates to politics and race has focused on Black Americans. This has created lively debate among scholars thinking about the application of these concepts to Latinos and other marginalized groups, in terms of definitions, methods and measurements, and findings. These conversations lay out what is known, what is debated, and what is still unknown in these spaces, and opens up room for discussion about how identity-based advocacy nonprofits situate themselves in an increasingly diverse Latino population.

Linked Fate and Group Consciousness

Black advocacy groups have been central to the framing and structuring of the identity-based advocacy group space. This centrality within the political sphere extends to the literature. Scholars have developed differing understandings of political behavior among

³¹ Dara Z. Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55.

ethnoracial groups in the United States, and many of these foundational works have studied Black Americans. Political scientist Michael Dawson's concept of linked fate examines the tensions between racial and class dimensions of the Black experience in America and how these tensions shape political behavior. He theorizes a link between individual success and collective success: Individual perceptions of what would benefit the overall group serve as stand-ins for what would benefit the individual, and this "plays a dominant role in shaping African American partisanship, political choice, and public opinion."³² This concept is a process that is triggered by cues (i.e., politics or racialization), and his work spurred a lot of subsequent scholarship, some of which will be explored below. Many scholars have applied this concept to other groups, yet some have critiqued linked fate for failing to account for plurality and individuality found within identity groups.³³

While Dawson developed the sociological concept of linked fate to understand Black political unity and behavior, scholars have also used this concept with regard to different minority groups. Arthur Miller et al. look at the political science theory of group consciousness and its relation to political participation and argue that there are theoretical issues with the concept. They define group identification as a "perceived self-location within a particular social stratum."³⁴ This is differentiated from group consciousness, which they explain as group identification *as well as* a sense of the group's position within broader society, resulting in a commitment to collective action along these lines to advance the group's interests. In other words, group identity, the perception of being marginalized, and the desire for collective action

³² Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 204, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzxx9d4>.

³³ Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*.

³⁴ Arthur H. Miller et al., "Group Consciousness and Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 3 (1981): 495, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2110816>.

as a means of overcoming disadvantage are the components of group consciousness. Where the literature is concerned with minority groups, it is mostly based on concepts developed in relation to Black Americans, and as such, scholars have called for more clarity regarding the relationship that other groups—like Latinos—have (or do not have) to linked fate and group consciousness.³⁵

Political scientists Gabriel Sanchez and Edward Vargas argue that measuring group consciousness is suitable for Black populations in the US, but that this is less true for white, Asian, and Latino populations.³⁶ Scholars in agreement with Sanchez and Vargas argue that as these concepts were initially developed for Black Americans, they should not be applied to other minority groups.³⁷

While some outright reject these concepts, others contend that particular factors and contexts are necessary conditions for Latino group consciousness. For example, Natalie Masuoka's 2006 political science model found that panethnic group consciousness depended upon educational attainment, gender, country of birth, political involvement, and perception of discrimination for Latinos. As such, she argues that political mobilization tactics must vary by panethnic group.³⁸ Even for those who agree that there is group consciousness across panethnic minorities, and that it is related to discrimination, there are disagreements about how to measure discrimination, and about whether the appropriate measure is *perceived* or *experienced*

³⁵ Efrén Pérez and Jessica Cobian, "Latino Opinion and Action in the Struggle for America's Political Future," *Annual Review of Political Science* 27, no. 1 (June 15, 2024): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041322-045828>.

³⁶ Gabriel Sanchez and Edward Vargas, "Taking a Closer Look at Group Identity," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915624571>.

³⁷ McClain et al., "Group Membership, Group Identity, and Group Consciousness."

³⁸ Natalie Masuoka, "Together They Become One: Examining the Predictors of Panethnic Group Consciousness Among Asian Americans and Latinos," *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 5 (2006): 1010.

discrimination.³⁹ Sanchez, Masuoka, and Abrams (2019) revised Masuoka's (2006) and others' work, updating it through 2016. Their findings support the argument that Latino linked fate is subject to context, and that perceived and experienced discrimination are positively associated with levels of linked fate in the group.⁴⁰ Overall, there is a lack of consensus in academia as to whether linked fate is an appropriate concept to apply to Latino politics.

Just as there are those who propose and those who reject linked fate's relevance for Latino politics, the same applies for literature on group consciousness.⁴¹ Proponents Efrén Pérez and Jessica Cobian, two political scientists, draw connections between Latino group consciousness and public opinion and argue that group consciousness raises support for policies perceived to affect the group.⁴² While Efrén Pérez and Cobian accept group consciousness, Sanchez takes a more caveated approach. He looks at salient and general policy issues and finds that place of birth and length of time lived in the US had the most influence on Latino public opinion. He finds perceived discrimination to be the element of group consciousness that most directly shapes public opinion (i.e., support for increased immigration and bilingual education).⁴³ Both works accept group consciousness as an occurring or possible phenomenon for Latinos, but to different degrees.

³⁹ Sanchez and Vargas, "Taking a Closer Look at Group Identity": 3.

⁴⁰ Sanchez, Masuoka, and Abrams, "Revisiting the Brown-Utility Heuristic."

⁴¹ Chris Zepeda-Millán and Sophia J. Wallace, "Racialization in Times of Contention: How Social Movements Influence Latino Racial Identity," *Politics, Groups and Identities* 1, no. 4 (2013): 510–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2013.842492>; Gabriel Sanchez, Natalie Masuoka, and Brooke Abrams, "Revisiting the Brown-Utility Heuristic: A Comparison of Latino Linked Fate in 2006 and 2016," *Politics, Groups & Identities* 7, no. 3 (2019): 673–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1638803>. These scholars reject linked fate's relevance for Latinos.

⁴² Pérez and Cobian, "Latino Opinion and Action in the Struggle for America's Political Future": 10.

⁴³ Gabriel R. Sanchez, "The Role of Group Consciousness in Latino Public Opinion," *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 444, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290605900311>.

Applications to the Latino Context: Does Latinidad Factor into Personal Politics?

Discussions of linked fate and group consciousness depend on how one defines identity, and how much of an influence Latino identity is assumed to have on individual political behavior. Pérez and Cobian argue that Latinos are not always politically conscious as members of an ethnoracial group. Instead, this relation is a continuum, dependent on contexts that trigger “pan-ethnicity from Latinos’ larger suite of identities” and then shape political perceptions.⁴⁴ These scholars frame Latinidad as one facet of an individual’s identity, rather than the sole organizing principle that is determining action at all times. Similarly, McClain et al. posit that members of panethnic groups are tied together, yet are diverse along national origin, ethnic, immigration status, and citizenship status lines. These differences within the group result in differing ideologies, interests, and political leanings. As such, members of this socially constructed umbrella group “may have multiple group identifications with various attachments to each of them,” leading to different levels of group consciousness within the group.⁴⁵ Pérez and Cobian and McClain et al. view ethnoracial identity as something that must be triggered by circumstance to arise as salient in one’s political behavior, thus explaining group-wide political differences and strength of group consciousness.

Others have similarly debated Latino political identity and the salience of Latino ethnoracial identity in national politics. Political scientist Benjamin Márquez explains identity as an amalgamation of judgements one has about racial discrimination, economics, and cultural practices. He posits identity as a political construction based on these views, and that one’s identity then contributes to how they act politically. In this understanding, members of a shared ethnic or racial group can arrive at distinct political ideologies. In short, there can be political and

⁴⁴ Pérez and Cobian, “Latino Opinion and Action in the Struggle for America’s Political Future”: 4.

⁴⁵ McClain et al., “Group Membership, Group Identity, and Group Consciousness.”

ideological diversity within any given ethnoracial group, and this can be explained by individual experiences with discrimination, the economy, and culture.⁴⁶ Sociologist Zulema Valdez also looks at how group identity and consciousness shape Latino political participation and finds that Latinos who identified ethnically were less likely to be registered to vote or vote than Latinos who identified either with being American or with belonging to a panethnic or racial group.⁴⁷ McClain et al. argue that panethnic identity among Latinos is a result of political contexts that mobilize this identity in particular contexts, and because of this, Latino panethnicity is temporary.⁴⁸

This understanding of panethnic Latino identity places group consciousness as an outcome, rather than a cause, of Latino public opinion and political behavior.⁴⁹ In the wake of the 2024 election, these seem to be increasingly salient analyses.

How Organizations Navigate These Challenges

As identity-based public interest nonprofits make decisions and define themselves as organizations, they must contend with the diversity of opinion and identity laid out in the previous sections of this chapter. This section analyzes how the growing heterogeneity and changing demographics of Latinos pose challenges to organizations in this space, setting up my own research on how specific nonprofits navigate these challenges.

Black public interest organizations laid the foundational frameworks for identity-based advocacy work. The twentieth century saw the founding of the National Association for the

⁴⁶ Benjamin Márquez, *Constructing Identities in Mexican-American Political Organizations: Choosing Issues, Taking Sides* (Austin, UNITED STATES: University of Texas Press, 2003): 7, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/detail.action?docID=3443144>.

⁴⁷ Valdez, “Political Participation Among Latinos in the United States”: 466.

⁴⁸ McClain et al., “Group Membership, Group Identity, and Group Consciousness.”

⁴⁹ Pérez and Cobian, “Latino Opinion and Action in the Struggle for America’s Political Future”: 10.

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Groups like the NAACP took great strides in advancing civil rights, and the success of the movement established parameters and a status quo for others looking to advocate on behalf of various ethnoracial groups. NAACP's success as an organization in part comes from the framing of the Black issue agenda as one national in scope. This meant that for similar groups pushing for Mexican American issues in Washington, it was challenging to get attention from policymakers, who saw Mexican Americans as a regional minority. As a result, policymakers prioritized Black agendas as a national minority group.⁵⁰ This challenge in part explains the rise of a panethnic "Hispanic" label, in order to reframe Mexican Americans and other national-origin groups (at the time, Cubans and Puerto Ricans) as parts of a broader—and larger—coalition of Hispanics. The shift to panethnicity has had lasting implications for these organizations and for Latino politics more broadly.

Latino identity-based organizations are facing these sorts of questions related to language and politics. In order to understand how groups navigate these obstacles, I review literature relating to organizations. Fifty-six percent of current civil rights and minority organizations were founded between 1960 and 1999, meaning many have gone through organizational changes over time.⁵¹ This section will address how these organizations try to make Latinos visible and what role funders play in shaping organizational agendas.

Making Latinos Visible

A central goal of these organizations has been to develop more data about the population they aim to represent. Numerical data and quantification, through mechanisms like the Census,

⁵⁰ G. Cristina Mora, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 46.

⁵¹ Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy*, 16.

have been particularly important to Latino politics. The height of the civil rights movement saw great strides toward addressing legal discrimination, but Mexican American “predecessors of today’s national Latino advocacy” felt their constituencies were invisible on the national agenda.⁵² At the same time, increased attention to demographics and the numbers behind them created a sentiment that ““statistical visibility is policy visibility.””⁵³ The end of the 1970s saw a full articulation of population statistics: Latino leaders wielding numbers and turning the public’s attention to the future of the population. This continued through the end of the twentieth century, when technological changes heightened this focus on data and population statistics.

Expanded ability to collect and analyze specific data about populations has implications for how we understand ethnoracial identity in the context of US politics. Márquez argues that as the Latino population has grown increasingly diverse both socially and economically, there has been a shift in what kinds of advocacy organizations are successful, and on which platforms they run. He gives an account of how advocacy organizations are key actors in the development of identity.⁵⁴ Similarly, Latin American studies scholar David Badillo accounts for MALDEF’s history in two eras: the late 1960s and the 1970s saw militancy and activism focused on political access for Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The second era began after 1980, when national issues took prominence over local ones (i.e., national immigration reform, citizenship laws, etc.).⁵⁵ In both accounts, numbers translate to political power and thus shape the issue priorities

⁵² Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 44.

⁵³ Rodríguez-Muñiz.

⁵⁴ Márquez, *Constructing Identities in Mexican-American Political Organizations*, 6.

⁵⁵ David A. Badillo, “MALDEF and the Evolution of Latino Civil Rights,” *Research Reports: A Series of Papers by the Institute for Latino Studies and Research Associates* 5 (January 2005): 1–18.

of organizations and the language used by these actors to describe and define the Latino population.

The Role of Funders

Questions of management and professionalization bring the conversation to funders: one-third of all public interest organizations are one-third to half-funded by foundations, and one in ten organizations receive over 90 percent of funding from external sources.⁵⁶ Márquez analyzes the role that outside funding plays in the activities of two types of Mexican American political organizations and finds that both types are greatly influenced by their dependence on external support. Financial contributions often are stipulated by the pursuit (or avoidance) of particular political issues.⁵⁷ Political, professionalized organizations are normally run by staff who share the same values as the largest funders, while grassroots groups are less hierarchically organized and are normally run by volunteers and more prone to protest. The Ford Foundation is a key example of this strategy of granting funds with conditions around issue-choice in an effort to move organizations away from radical protest movements and toward institutionalized politics.

Across Latino organizations, 75 percent of the funding from foundations was traced to just seven foundations, with nearly half solely from the Ford Foundation.⁵⁸ This tactic puts smaller groups in the position of deciding between spending organizational resources and energies fundraising and crowdsourcing to stay afloat or accepting large-donor funds and the subsequent implications for the organization's agenda. For example, political scientist Megan

⁵⁶ Benjamin Márquez, "Mexican-American Political Organizations and Philanthropy: Bankrolling a Social Movement," *The Social Service Review (Chicago)* 77, no. 3 (2003): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1086/375794>.

⁵⁷ Márquez: 329.

⁵⁸ Márquez: 341.

Ming Francis outlines how the American Fund for Public Service (also referred to as the Garland Fund) engaged in a movement capture of the NAACP. She defines this concept as a process where funders exert their influence and hinge their financial support for civil rights organizations in order to shape groups' issue agendas. The NAACP had focused solely on mob violence and lynching until struggling to secure funding for this work in 1925. It was in this context that the "Garland Fund tied the biggest donation the NAACP had ever received to the pursuit of a different civil rights issue: education."⁵⁹ This ecosystem and dependence on institutional actors for funding moderates these organizations and increases the profile of mainstream politics instead of radical movements.

Funders may partially shape the issues that organizations pursue, but there are other factors to how issue agendas are set as well. First, Dara Strolovitch, a political scientist, asks how organizations decide which issues to prioritize. She breaks down the issues relevant to an organization into four categories: universal issues that face the population as a whole; majority issues that affect the organization's members fairly equally; disadvantaged-subgroup issues that affect subsets of the membership who are more disadvantaged (i.e., politically, economically); and advantaged-subgroup issues facing members who are relatively more advantaged.⁶⁰ She finds that organizations are much more active on issues that affect most of their members than subgroup issues, but that within subgroup focus, more energy and resources are spent on advantaged-subgroup issues than disadvantaged-subgroup issues. Advantaged-subgroup issues get more attention than universal issues, as well, despite genuine commitments from the organizations around the importance of advocating for the disadvantaged sects of their members.

⁵⁹ Megan Ming Francis, "The Price of Civil Rights: Black Lives, White Funding, and Movement Capture," *Law & Society Review* 53, no. 1 (March 2019): 279, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12384>.

⁶⁰ Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy*, 7.

In other words, organizations are always having to consider how advocacy in one area would affect the various subgroups of their constituents, and they will often end up making decisions that prioritize more advantaged subgroups.

Second, Strolovitch also points to an increasingly common trend among identity-based organizations now attempting to represent broader groups. She cites the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, which states it began with the mission of serving poor Black Americans, but that its work over the years has brought greater justice to *all* Americans.⁶¹ Similarly, MALDEF began as an organization for Mexican Americans, but has since expanded to all Latinos as well as the broader American public. Organizations may be facing pressures to appeal to a wider audience (and appease funders). In addition to the different groups within a constituency and appeals to funders and the broader public, a third consideration that organizations must have in mind when they decide what issues to pursue is their own reputations. They are more likely to choose higher-profile and more winnable cases because policy wins are good for their reputations, meaning that disadvantaged-subgroup issues may be sidelined as a result. Thinking about these three factors in concert with the established influence of philanthropy in the nonprofit sector raises serious questions about how organizations navigate these challenges—and how successful they are able to be.

Separate from but connected to the challenge of determining issue agendas is that of framing and constructing ethnoracial identity, which becomes more difficult in the case of panethnic groups. Márquez calls this “organizationally generated identities,” referring to organizations’ creation of identities that are in line with the vision of who they want to serve.⁶² However, it is also important to consider the reverse: how individual and group politics shape

⁶¹ Strolovitch, 55.

⁶² Márquez, *Constructing Identities in Mexican-American Political Organizations*, 12.

and determine the organizations working to serve them. Strolovitch argues that collective identities are often framed by institutional actors, like advocacy groups, and are used to attract donors and constituents, mobilize members, attract media and policy-maker attention, and influence conversations around policy.⁶³ This conception of collective identity is also used to filter through and justify the issues that are chosen as important to the group. Similarly, Okamoto and Mora find it is hard to equitably distribute resources and attention to issue agendas within panethnic organizations, and challenges can arise when one subgroup dominates the overall panethnic agenda.⁶⁴ The desire to advocate for the entire community in the US drives leaders to create their own narratives to gain influence in the national arena.⁶⁵ This echoes the history outlined earlier in this chapter regarding the NAACP as a standard-setting organization for national-level identity-based issue advocacy.

Conclusion

This chapter situates my thesis in the existing literature across three perspectives. The first section takes a broader view of how different actors—scholars, the US Census Bureau, and the public—have grappled with the diversity of and continuous change within the Latino population. The second section takes a closer look at political behavior, both at the group level and among individuals. The third section asks what challenges that discord and diversity pose for identity-based public interest nonprofits aiming to represent Latino interests. Finally, I conclude here with a discussion about the gaps in the conversation that this project seeks to address in subsequent chapters.

⁶³ Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy*, 59.

⁶⁴ Okamoto and Mora, “Panethnicity.”

⁶⁵ Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future*, 20.

While scholars have looked at ethnoracial identity construction generally and as it pertains to Latinos, this thesis seeks to address a gap in the conversation. The gap is found at the site of the organization, and more specifically, the identity-based public interest nonprofit. While these organizations may be thought of as actors themselves, involved in the process of evolving public understandings of Latino identity, one can also think about how the demographics and preferences of a population equally shape the organization. The Latino population has grown increasingly diverse along several sets of demographics. Identity-based advocacy nonprofits function on the premise that they are advocating for the priorities of a particular population, and as such, represent that population. This means that the issues that an organization chooses to address and prioritize speak to how it perceives the priorities of its constituents and what it believes to be best for the group.

In the chapters that follow, I ask what sorts of challenges arise for identity-based advocacy nonprofits pushing Latino issue agendas as a result of these changing demographics and a divisive general election in November 2024. I will explore two prongs of this in order to answer this question. First, what language do groups use to discuss Latino identity and how has this messaging changed over time? Second, what issues have groups chosen to prioritize and at what moments in time has this agenda shifted? What do these two components mean for the organizations themselves? How do they understand their position in the Latino community, and how do they navigate the diverse set of identities and perspectives within the population they are attempting to represent and mobilize?

CHAPTER 3: RAISING THE STAKES AND CATERING TO AN EXPANDING GROUP

— MALDEF’S COMMUNICATIONS

After the 2022 midterms, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) President and General Counsel Thomas Saenz said: “Latino voters make the difference. This marks at least the fourth consecutive midterm election in which the expected narrative has changed... because of Latino voters. This great progress came in the face of unprecedented threats to democracy—attempts to deter and prevent participation, particularly by the ever-growing Latino voter community. These efforts will not work; political advisers and their clients must update their playbook to move Latinos to the center of the game.”¹ This quote reflects several of the themes I found in my observation of MALDEF’s communications. Saenz describes a collective, united Latino vote with political influence; references threats to democracy and the civil rights of Latinos; and mentions the growth of Latinos in the US and the attention this growth garners from political leaders and the media.

In this chapter, I examine how MALDEF’s communications portray the Latino community and what issues it highlights in its public statements. I conduct a text analysis of its press releases from 2016, and its Instagram posts from 2020 and 2024 in order to answer my research questions about how nonprofits communicate about Latino identity, and what the issue areas they focus on say about their assumptions regarding Latino political preferences. I find that the issue areas of education, freedom from open and obvious bias and racism, immigrant rights and immigration, and voting rights are the most-mentioned issues over the three separate years of analysis. Within these four issues, I conduct a sentiment analysis and code for various other themes. Two findings stand out. The first is that MALDEF has shifted to broaden its descriptions

¹ MALDEF, “Latinos Prove Decisive In Critical 2022 Midterms,” *MALDEF* (blog), November 10, 2022, <https://www.maldef.org/2022/11/latinos-prove-decisive-in-critical-2022-midterms/>.

of the groups it protects. While MALDEF was created as a civil rights legal defense organization for Latinos in the 1960s, as politics have changed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—and as immigration has become increasingly politicized—MALDEF has shifted, too. My second finding is that MALDEF’s communication strategy, more often than not, takes a negative tone. I conclude that this is because the organization is anxious to alert people that their rights are endangered, and that MALDEF plays a crucial role in protecting those rights.

Background on MALDEF

MALDEF was founded in 1968, in San Antonio, Texas. As noted in chapter one, the organization is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, meaning it cannot endorse or oppose political candidates and must remain nonpartisan. Its mission is “to protect and defend the rights of all Latinos living in the United States and the constitutional rights of all Americans” as the country’s “leading Latino legal civil rights organization.”² The organization was modeled after the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the premiere Black civil rights organization. At the time, there was not an equivalent organization for the growing Mexican American population in the South and Midwest. The Ford Foundation was concerned about this, worrying that without an established, mainstream, moderate organization dedicated to Mexican American civil rights, more radical grassroots groups would create chaos. In May 1968, Pete Tijerina of LULAC and Jack Greenberg of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund secured a \$2,250,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to start MALDEF for “litigation and general education activities.”³

² MALDEF, “Mission,” MALDEF, <https://www.maldef.org/about/mission/>.

³ Teresa Palomo Acosta, “Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund,” Texas State Historical Association, April 1, 1995, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/mexican-american-legal-defense-and-educational-fund>.

The Ford Foundation arguably supported this endeavor in a strategic move to “draw activists away from disruptive politics and into institutionalized politics.”⁴ Rather than a group of activists who were forced to accommodate Ford’s stipulations and influence, Ford curated a team of employees who were compatible with its goals. As a result, MALDEF grew as an organization “committed to pragmatic and policy-oriented strategies for change,” and one that represented Latinos but was not accountable to them, as would be the case in a membership-based structure.⁵

MALDEF took up Mexican American demands around issues like supervision of local police, higher education access, and bilingual education opportunities in schools in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the organization’s structure as a civil rights litigation group inherently distinguished it from traditions of Mexican American volunteer-based community organizing practices. In contrast, MALDEF’s “sole function was to expand civil liberties through the courts.”⁶ In time, Ford established the five litigation areas that MALDEF could use its money for: education, employment, immigration, leadership, and political participation. The constraints of working within the legal system to expand formal equality places limits on the ability to employ identity politics and may explain MALDEF’s emphasis on expanding civil rights for *all* Americans as well as Latinos. Organizations like MALDEF exist within the broader fabric of Latino politics but are distinct in that they seek to “advocate for the “Latino community” as a whole,” focused on national-level politics, regardless of where their headquarters are located.⁷

⁴ Benjamin Márquez, “Mexican - American Political Organizations and Philanthropy: Bankrolling a Social Movement,” *The Social Service Review (Chicago)* 77, no. 3 (2003): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1086/375794>.

⁵ Benjamin Márquez, “Trial by Fire: The Ford Foundation and Maldef in the 1960s,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 8, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 663, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1528554>.

⁶ David A. Badillo, “MALDEF and the Evolution of Latino Civil Rights,” *Research Reports: A Series of Papers by the Institute for Latino Studies and Research Associates* 5 (January 2005): 36.

⁷ Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future: Latino Civil Rights and the Politics of Demographic Change* (Princeton: University Press, 2021), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691205908>.

Tijerina served as the organization's first president until 1970, when the headquarters were moved from San Antonio to San Francisco after Ford Foundation officials complained of the city's and some attorneys' radicalism.⁸ This foreshadowed a larger shift in MALDEF's focus: From its founding and through the 1970s, it took a more activist focus on political rights for Mexican Americans in the Southwest, but after 1980, it began to work on larger, broader-scope issues like immigrant rights, voting rights, and education. The shift to national issues also marked a move away from more radical grassroots activism toward litigation and the pursuit of legal redress, which not only benefits the organization's constituents but also expands and upholds Americans' civil rights more broadly.

Some of MALDEF's most prominent cases include 1970 *White v. Regester*, which addressed racial gerrymandering and at-large elections that diluted minority voting power. MALDEF's efforts in this case, and its work on voting rights more widely, helped bring about the Voting Rights Act expansion of 1975. Another case, *Plyler v. Doe*, was a 1982 Supreme Court case litigated under the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause which established that all students are entitled to a public K-12 education, regardless of immigration status. In 1994, the organization successfully challenged Proposition 187, a California ballot initiative that denied social services to undocumented immigrants. In 2018, the federal *Luna v. Kern County Board of Supervisors* case was settled, resulting in a new districting plan that gave Latinos more proportional voting power. In addition to these landmark cases, MALDEF has also worked on day laborers' rights, immigrant rights, and employment protections. Currently, it is challenging Texas's S.B. 4 status, which requires local governments to participate in enforcing federal immigration law; challenging *State of Texas v. United States*, in which multiple states are trying

⁸ Badillo, "MALDEF and the Evolution of Latino Civil Rights," 7.

to challenge the legality of DACA; and addressing financial discrimination based on immigration status.

MALDEF has a long history of funding from the Ford Foundation and continues to receive grants and institutional support from various foundations, including Ford. Between 2006 and 2025, the Ford Foundation awarded 19 grants to MALDEF, totaling \$14,701,000.⁹ The Carnegie Corporation has provided financial support since 1974, and most recently granted \$2,000,000 in 2023.¹⁰ Other funders include the MacArthur Foundation, the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, Neo Philanthropy, and the California Community Foundation.¹¹ As noted earlier, the Ford Foundation, at least in the past, stipulated the issue areas that MALDEF could use grant funds to pursue. These issue areas overlap almost entirely with the four issue areas I have identified in my analysis.

Methods

Constructing the Dataset

I chose to look at 2016, 2020, and 2024 to get a sense of change over time in MALDEF and Voto Latino, which I discuss in the next chapter. To set up my corpus, I used Python to develop a script that pulled all the Instagram posts from MALDEF's Instagram account (@Maldefian) from the years 2020 and 2024, sorted into folders by year. Through this process I accumulated several thousand text files containing captions from posts, and separated JPEG files

⁹ Ford Foundation, "Grants Database MALDEF," Ford Foundation, accessed February 16, 2025, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/>.

¹⁰ Carnegie Corporation of New York, "Promoting Social Justice: A Vision of Philanthropic Activism," Carnegie Results, 2007, <https://www.carnegie.org/grants/grants-database/>.

¹¹ Impala, "MALDEF Funders," February 16, 2025, <https://app.impala.digital/profile/493468/WWW.MALDEF.ORG>.

containing one image related to the post. As of February 2022, the account has 1,200 posts spanning seven years, dating back to the account's creation in 2018. Since MALDEF's Instagram only dates back to 2018, and does not therefore have materials from 2016, I manually downloaded the press releases MALDEF has published on its website as PDF files. Next, I established my sample and cleaned and organized the data using the same methodology across both press releases and Instagram posts.

Establishing the Sample

Once I had my folders containing all of the post materials from my three years of interest, I began to establish the parameters of my sample. Since it would not be feasible to analyze every single text, image, and video within my timeframe, I developed a list of 86 keywords and phrases (i.e., "Latino," "Mexican American," "K-12," "dreamer," "deport," "voting rights") according to my research questions, which ask about representations of Latino identity, as well as organizations' stated issue areas and their assumptions about Latino political preferences. This list served as my inclusion and exclusion criteria, condensing my corpus to a set of materials that contained information most relevant to this project. I developed a list of identity-related terms and then combined this set with a list of the 14 stated issue areas of each organization (combining redundant areas), and some related keywords and phrases. This frequency analysis allowed me to work with a smaller sample set of captions and images that were more related to my research questions. Using NVivo 15, I conducted a word frequency search for the keywords and phrases in this list in order to develop a subset of posts. Once I had this list, I used Python to move the relevant files from the original folders into new folders, again organized by year.

In order to conduct both a quantitative analysis and an in-depth qualitative analysis, I further cut down my sample size to 65 posts per year per organization. There were 77 press

releases from 2016, so I chose to analyze all of them, rather than cut down my sample to 65 in accordance with the methods I then applied to Instagram posts. I made this decision in order to evaluate roughly equivalent amounts of material from both the press releases and the Instagram posts. Once I had these folders set up, I used Python to randomly select 65 Instagram posts from each year. Finally, I imported the two folders of 65 posts and the one folder of 77 press releases into NVivo 15.

Below is the breakdown of the codes I developed in order to assign my final dataset from MALDEF according to one or multiple issue areas. I also coded along the lines of identity, looking at keywords and phrases used to describe Latino identity (i.e., “Latino,” “Latinx,” “Latine,” “Chicano”). After assigning each file to one or multiple issue areas, I was able to see the four most common areas of focus, both by number of references overall, and by the number of files containing these references.

Figure 3.1: Codebook for Text Analysis

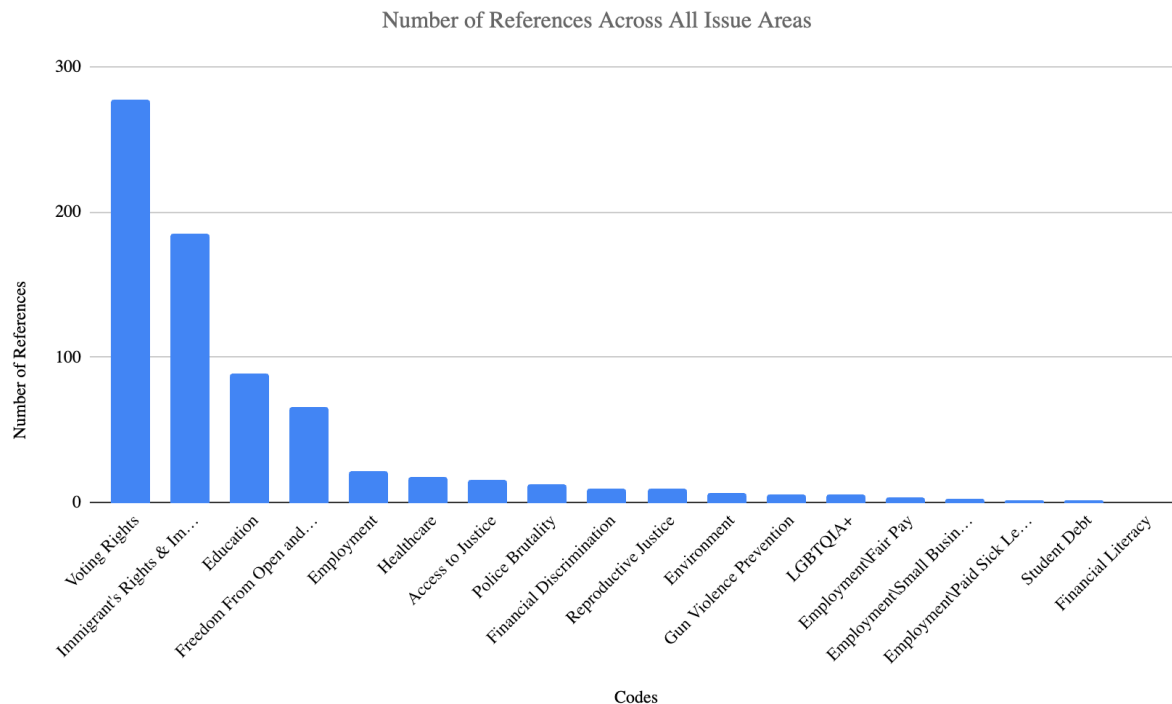
Codes	Number of coding references	Number of items coded
Voting Rights	277	163
Immigrants' Rights and Immigration	185	128
Education	89	55
Freedom from Open and Obvious Bias and Racism	66	50
Employment	22	8
Healthcare	18	5
Access to Justice	16	10
Police Brutality	13	2
Financial Discrimination	10	3
Reproductive Justice	10	4
Environment	7	3
Gun Violence Prevention	6	4
LGBTQIA+	6	4
Employment\Fair Pay	4	2
Employment\Small Businesses	3	2
Employment\Paid Sick Leave	2	1
Student Debt	2	1
Financial Literacy	0	0

Qualitative Analysis

After completing this first round of text analysis, I identified four issue areas that were prominent across all three years and both organizations: (1) voting rights, (2) immigrants' rights and immigration, (3) education, and (4) freedom from open and obvious bias and racism. Although issue areas like financial literacy and student debt were listed among the organizations' focus areas, they were not salient in my analysis. There were not any additional outlying issue areas that arose as significant during my coding analysis, so I did not add additional issue-area codes to my codebook. The graphs below illustrate the number of times a particular code was

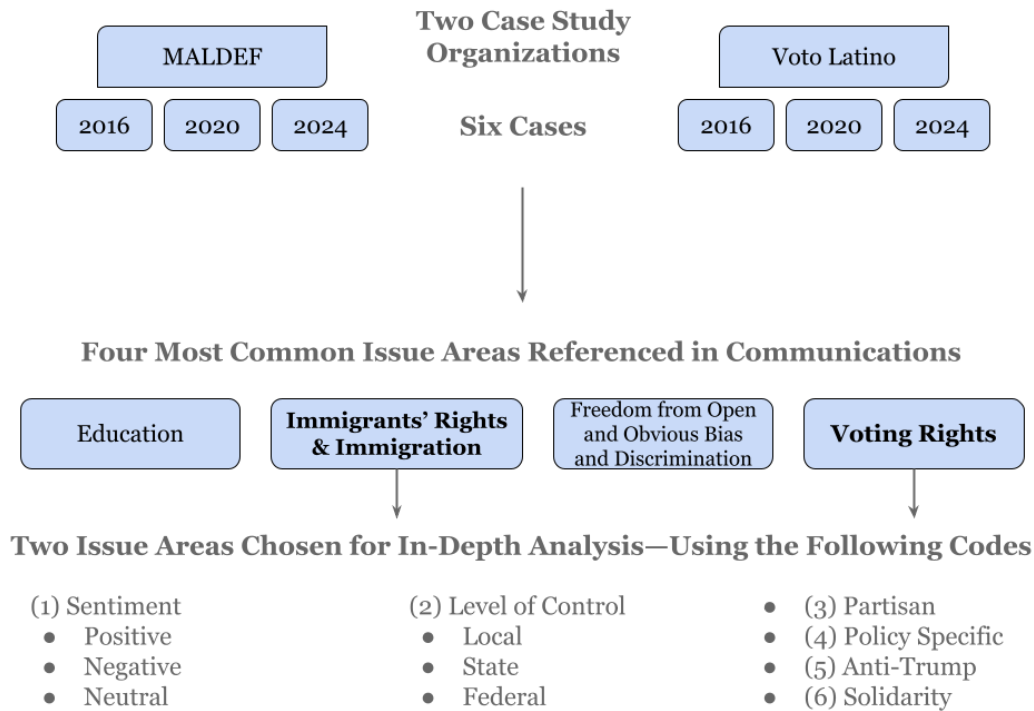
referenced across all the issue areas I analyzed, highlighting the four most-referenced issues which I have outlined above.

Figure 3.2: Issue Area References



Once I established these four core issue areas, I honed my analysis further. I developed a second list of codes to analyze the emotional tone in a post, assess whether the communication focused on the local, state, or federal governments, and to develop a sense of the organization’s political stances and sentiments. I analyzed each of the four issue areas along these new codes. Finally, I did close readings of all the posts referencing voting rights and immigrants’ rights and immigration. Below is a diagram outlining how I narrowed my sample and analyzed my corpus.

Figure 3.3: Developing the Sample and Depicting Levels of Analysis



A Closer Look: MALDEF on Immigration and Voting Rights

In the following sections I dive into the two most important categories I examined: immigrants' rights and immigration and voting rights in turn. I pull out key themes that were salient across the three years of analysis within each issue, looking at both overall messaging on the issue as well as change over time. Finally, I look at how MALDEF communicates about Latino identity throughout the years and across these two issues.

Immigrants' Rights and Immigration

MALDEF's communications on immigrants' rights and immigration emphasized three themes: (1) race, ethnicity, and Trump, (2) economics and policy, and (3) Latino identity. MALDEF's communications provided staunch support for immigrants' rights and DACA recipients in particular, while simultaneously condemning Trump's actions and rhetoric.

MALDEF invoked race and ethnicity to underscore how this identity marker is used to discriminate against various groups, and to build an argument for cross-group solidarity. It discussed economics to appeal to a national audience and to combat claims that immigrants are bad for the economy. Finally, its descriptions of Latino identity shifted slightly over the three years I analyzed.

The chart below lays out part of my analysis, showing the number of references across the subcodes I look at by year. Positive posts focus on developments in line with the organization's goals. For example, one post read, "Today a new Biden administration rule granted recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) eligibility for health care through the Affordable Care Act."¹² A neutral post usually provides new information or updates on a particular case without broader messaging about the issue at stake: "Watch MALDEF President and General Counsel Thomas A. Saenz give us the latest information on the pending oral argument in the DACA case."¹³ Finally, a negative post—the most frequent sentiment I identified in MALDEF's posts—communicates a sense of urgency or danger that MALDEF is attempting to address. One example of this regarded the "series of vitriolic commentary made by [Trump] and aimed in particular at Hispanic Americans."¹⁴

¹² MALDEF, [Making health care available to all DACA], @Maldefian, May 3, 2024.

¹³ MALDEF, [Watch Saenz give us the latest information], @Maldefian, July 31, 2024.

¹⁴ MALDEF, "National Latino Leaders Denounce Donald Trump's Attacks on Judge Curiel," *MALDEF*, June 8, 2016.

Figure 3.4: Subcodes for Analysis of MALDEF's Immigration-Related Posts

MALDEF Immigration	2016	2020	2024	Total
Positive	10	6	21	37
Negative	22	7	22	51
Neutral	0	1	9	10
Federal	16	10	18	44
State	12	2	6	20
Local	4	1	26	29
Partisan	4	4	5	9
Policy-Specific	13	5	20	38
Anti-Trump	5	4	5	14
Solidarity	8	4	14	26
Population Growth Stats	0	1	0	1
Ties to Education	14	5	35	54

In terms of sentiment and overall messaging in 2016, MALDEF as an organization was very focused on the impending threat of a Donald Trump presidency, and with dealing with the public anxiety surrounding it. Its tone in these posts conveys a desire to set the record straight about which laws protect specific rights, seemingly in anticipation of what the Trump Administration might do once in office. As all of this content predated Trump's inauguration, much of it was in reaction to Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail. As such, there was a lot of attention on border policy, mass deportations, and racist and xenophobic comments made by Trump over the course of the year. MALDEF stated its concern that the Trump Administration would "undertake mass deportations and adopt other unlawful immigration enforcement,"¹⁵ and condemned the "anti-immigration talk from Trump himself."¹⁶

¹⁵ MALDEF, "MALDEF and NDLO announce Joint Immigrant Civil Rights Defense Effort," *MALDEF*, November 18, 2016.

¹⁶ MALDEF, [We are seeing more invasion talk than we did back then], @Maldefian, August 2, 2024.

In 2020, MALDEF made various economic appeals to what seemed like a broader audience, asserting that immigrants are positive contributors and improve the overall US economy. There was an emphasis placed on the hard work and taxpayer dollars that immigrants bring to America, as well as the argument—framed through an economic lens—that immigrants benefit all Americans.

In 2024, the organization strongly condemned anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric and policy, lending more attention to DACA-related policy. It repeatedly asserted its dedication to the issues it laid claim to addressing, as well as to the Latino and immigrant communities. In repeatedly calling out racist, xenophobic, and discriminatory comments and policies, MALDEF positioned itself as an antiracist organization working to defend equality. Many posts were reiterations of its record on immigration-related cases and its experience on the matter. In the subsections that follow I will elaborate on these patterns that I uncovered in my analysis.

Race, Ethnicity, and Trump

The first theme I identified was that of race, ethnicity, and Trump. MALDEF was focused on establishing the parameters of the law and ensuring that various groups, including Latino and Black people, were not being subject to race-based discrimination. A major focus of this work was legal advocacy. In one case, MALDEF challenged Arizona’s SB 1070, a law that required officers to check the immigration status of anyone they had “reasonable suspicion” of being undocumented in order to try and curb unauthorized immigration. A judge ruled that officers cannot “use race or ethnicity” to determine whether “someone is unlawfully present in the United States.”¹⁷ In another case against Kern County, California, MALDEF raised a suit on behalf of “Latino and Black Plaintiffs” who were “subjected to discrimination and denied equal

¹⁷ MALDEF, “Arizona Attorney General Issues Opinion Establishing Constitutional Standards for Enforcement of Key SB 1070 Provisions, Ending Lawsuit,” *MALDEF*, September 16, 2016.

educational opportunity.”¹⁸ In this case, MALDEF links its work to protect the rights of Latinos to Black Americans as well, widening the stakes of its work by expanding the number of groups and people it seeks to protect. The nonprofit made many similar statements expressing solidarity with Latinos and immigrants over the course of 2024.

In a joint suit with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), MALDEF addressed the “growing concern among Latinos and immigrants” after Trump’s election to office in 2016, who feared “mass deportations” and “unlawful immigration enforcement,” ending by stating that the “Latino immigrant community” would “not be alone” in facing “draconian federal enforcement tactics” from the Trump Administration.¹⁹ Similarly, it called out reports of “anti-Latino, anti-immigrant bullying” in schools after the election, tying this to another case it worked on regarding an “ignorance-filled” history textbook in Texas.²⁰ By expressing support for Latinos and immigrants as marginalized groups, and by linking these groups to Black Americans as well, MALDEF underscores the role of race and ethnicity as pervasive grounds for discrimination. By showing that this issue affects a wide audience—not strictly Latinos—it is making a case for its own importance as a protector and legal defense fund.

MALDEF also focused significant attention on Trump’s rhetoric and its harmful ramifications. The organization called out his “attacks” and “vitriolic commentary” targeting “Hispanic Americans” and blaming violent crime on “blacks and Hispanics.”²¹ MALDEF President Thomas Saenz was quoted frequently, often speaking out against Trump policy and

¹⁸ MALDEF, “Court Allows Discrimination Suit Against Kern County Office of Education to Proceed,” *MALDEF*, January 12, 2016.

¹⁹ MALDEF, “MALDEF and NDLON Announce Joint Immigrant Civil Rights Defense Effort.”

²⁰ MALDEF, “MALDEF Applauds Texas Board of Education for Rejecting Offensive Textbook,” *MALDEF*, November 17, 2016.

²¹ MALDEF, “National Latino Leaders Denounce Donald Trump's Attacks on Judge Curiel.”

rhetoric, warning that threats made to “communities that value the contributions of immigrants” are harmful and only serve to “undermine public safety and foster division in our nation.”²² Saenz also called out Trump’s immigration policy during the Covid-19 pandemic as a display of “nativism” and “hypocrisy” aimed at “political diversion” by a man with a “corrupt and racist heart.”²³ In other posts, MALDEF accused Trump of “punish[ing] the nation by targeting immigrants,” spurring more “invasion talk” and spouting more “anti-immigration talk,” and drawing a connection between the growing number of “political leaders spout[ing] the same racist ideas” and the “anti-immigrant rhetoric” that “led an unstable man to kill 23 Latinos and injure many others at an El Paso Walmart.”²⁴ By calling out and drawing attention to all of this, MALDEF is signaling the stakes of this rhetoric, and alerting its followers that they should care about this, too. By highlighting the offensive and racist rhetoric in mainstream politics, MALDEF makes a case for itself and its value as a legal defense fund working on behalf of Latinos.

Economics and Policy

In addition to race- and ethnicity-based commentary and pushback against Trump’s White House, economic appeals and policy-based proposals were also prominent. MALDEF advocated for healthcare and in-state tuition for DACA recipients, arguing that this would be “of significant benefit to every American.”²⁵ In a similar vein, it stated that “anti-immigrant bias”

²² MALDEF, “MALDEF Statement on President Trump’s Action on Immigration Enforcement,” *MALDEF*, January 28, 2016.

²³ MALDEF, [Saenz’s response to Trump’s border proclamation], @Maldefian, April 23, 2020.

²⁴ MALDEF, [Trump’s tenacious efforts to punish immigrants], @Maldefian, June 18, 2020; MALDEF, [We are seeing more invasion talk than we did back then]; MALDEF, [El Paso shooting], @Maldefian, August 2, 2024.

²⁵ MALDEF, [Making health care available to all DACA].

and “unlawful discrimination” were “antithetical” to the work of credit unions, which should not turn away credit-worthy individuals based on their immigration status.²⁶ In these examples MALDEF makes an economic appeal to the general US population, arguing that targeting and discriminating against immigrants is actually detrimental to the national economy and to the self-interest of businesses and individuals. This can be seen as a counterargument to the popular conservative claim that immigrants steal native-born workers’ jobs and are therefore bad for the economy.²⁷ In its financial discrimination cases, MALDEF claimed it works to protect “immigrants’ right to participate in the US economy,”²⁸ as well as “protecting DACA recipients and the right of all immigrants to live and work in the US.”²⁹ In the wake of the 2024 presidential election outcome, the nonprofit emphasized that there is “no excuse for treating DACA recipients differently than other long-term residents, including citizens,” and reminded its followers that it will continue to “aggressively enforce the rule of law” on behalf of its constituents.³⁰ Part of the organization’s argument is not simply that it is unjust or unlawful to discriminate against immigrants or to hyperfixate on cracking down on immigration, but that it is actually to the economic benefit of everyone—all Americans—to have immigrants contributing to our economy. I can imagine that MALDEF advanced this argument most frequently in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and public anxiety around the economy and inflation in order to appeal to a broader audience and garner greater support.

²⁶ MALDEF, [Antithetical to the mission of any credit union], @Maldefian, January 11, 2024.

²⁷ Fatima Hussein, “Despite Trump’s Claims, Data Shows Migrants Aren’t Taking Jobs from Black or Hispanic People,” PBS News, October 12, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/despite-trumps-claims-data-shows-migrants-arent-taking-jobs-from-black-or-hispanic-people>.

²⁸ MALDEF, [Immigrants’ right to participate in the US economy], @Maldefian, March 12, 2024.

²⁹ MALDEF, [Protecting DACA recipients and the right of all immigrants], @Maldefian, May 8, 2024.

³⁰ MALDEF, [No excuse for treating DACA recipients differently], @Maldefian, November 6, 2024.

The organization has also spoken out in favor of particular policy areas related to immigration. One example is DACA, a policy that ““has already benefited hundreds of thousands of young immigrants,”” for which MALDEF put out a “first-of-its-kind toolkit” to help undocumented students apply.³¹ Another example concerns immigration detention centers, where the “mass detention of immigrants” “disproportionately impact[s]” Latinos and “tears apart our families and communities.”³² This messaging about economics and particular policies serves to underscore the contributions of immigrants to the American economy, through labor and through taxes, and seeks to emphasize the dividing and polarizing nature of Trump’s and MAGA rhetoric, to the detriment of all Americans, not just the marginalized.

Latino Identity: Emphasizing Positive Contributions and the Need to Protect the Vulnerable

The third component of my analysis addresses my research question about how these nonprofit organizations describe Latino identity, and how descriptions have changed over time. Within the issue area of immigrants’ rights and immigration, a few trends come to light. In 2016, MALDEF used the identity descriptors of “immigrant taxpayers,” “Hispanic,” and “Latino.” In one press release, MALDEF described the hateful comments made by Trump toward “Hispanic Americans.”³³ “Hispanic” was not used as an identity descriptor in any posts in my samples from 2020 or 2024. The emphasis on the taxpaying behavior of immigrants may be an attempt to resonate with Americans who might have more negative associations about immigrants and the economy. It is also notable that in all posts relating to DACA, there were no mentions of or

³¹ MALDEF, “MALDEF Launches First-of-Its-Kind Toolkit to Assist Undocumented Youth Applying for DACA,” *MALDEF*, October 13, 2016.

³² MALDEF, “MALDEF Urges DHS Sec. Johnson to End Use of Private Prison Operators for Immigration Detention,” *MALDEF*, December 3, 2016.

³³ MALDEF, “National Latino Leaders Denounce Donald Trump’s Attacks on Judge Curiel,” *MALDEF*, June 8, 2016.

associations with Latino identity. For example, in one court case, the Jane Does were “three undocumented Texas mothers.”³⁴ There was no further description as to their identities, even though MALDEF says it is a Latino civil rights organization. I imagine this might be in response to the politicization of DACA, and the connections that have been forged between undocumented immigration and the US Latino population. MALDEF may want to create distance between these things and push back against the conservative narrative about masses of undocumented Latin American migrants coming into the country. Of course, people from all over the world may be protected under DACA, so it does in fact apply to a broader group than Latinos.

In 2020, notable terms included “the excluded,” “mixed-status families,” and “our communities.” Again, Latino identity was not mentioned in content on immigration and undocumented people. In fact, in 2020, there were no mentions of the word “Latino” in any posts in this issue area at all. In general, however, as I have noted, there were fewer posts overall in 2020 on immigration than in other years, likely due to the pandemic. MALDEF asked for help in its work to “protect the excluded,” like “mixed-status families” and immigrants “detained in unsafe ICE conditions.”³⁵ In this call for support, it stated that “together we can help our communities obtain justice.”³⁶ This language positions MALDEF as a protector, and mixed-status families and immigrants as excluded or vulnerable members of the community. It also speaks to what I discussed in the race, ethnicity, and Trump section of my analysis, in which MALDEF expressed solidarity and links Latino struggles for civil rights with other marginalized

³⁴ “MALDEF Denounces Supreme Court Failure to Act on President Obama’s Executive Actions on Immigration,” *MALDEF*, June 24, 2016.

³⁵ MALDEF, [Help MALDEF protect the excluded], @Maldefian, May 5, 2020.

³⁶ MALDEF.

groups—particularly, Black Americans. Broader, more inclusive language allows MALDEF’s statements to apply to more people.

Finally, in 2024, MALDEF’s language around identity was focused on “the Latino community” and “our nation’s Latino and immigrant communities.” There was one mention of “Latina.” Many captions and posts underscore the community nature of the Latino population, perhaps a nod to the idea of linked fate and common interests. MALDEF stands against “hate-filled threats against the Latino community” and works to “combat anti-Latino, anti-immigrant rhetoric.”³⁷ President Thomas Saenz was applauded as an “advocate” for the “nation’s Latino and immigrant communities,” and a “champion for diversity and social justice.”³⁸ It is interesting to note the distinction drawn—and yet at the same time, the linkage formed—between Latinos and immigrants in this language. MALDEF seems to be drawing a Venn diagram of sorts between these two groups that sometimes overlap. This would be consistent with its work to protect the voting rights of US citizens and combating xenophobic racism against US-born Latinos, as well as working to underscore the positive value of immigrants to US society and to protect their rights. Finally, one “proud” “Latina” board member wrote that she “will be in the trenches with you all,” and thanked supporters for “standing with [MALDEF] in this important work.”³⁹ Here, she underscores a sense of solidarity and a shared set of goals and ideals.

In my sample, only two immigrant rights and immigration-related images featured real individuals—rather than stock photos or text-based graphics. On the left, a photo of a young Latino man with a serious expression looks into the distance. He is wearing a bandana patterned

³⁷ MALDEF, [Hate-filled threats to the Latino community], @Maldefian, May 3, 2024.

³⁸ MALDEF, [Mr. Saenz is an advocate], @Maldefian, March 11, 2024.

³⁹ MALDEF, [As a proud board member of MALDEF, Latina], @Maldefian, November 9, 2024.

with the American flag and has two stickers on his cheeks that read “DACA.” This image is ostensibly from a protest, and the surrounding text commemorates a moment in the organization’s history—May 8, 2018—when it filed a motion to intervene in *Texas v. United States*, a case challenging the legality of DACA. It was posted on May 8, 2024, six years after MALDEF joined the case, which is still ongoing.⁴⁰ The image on the right is also another protest image from 2024, featuring three Latina women and a Latino man, all holding handmade signs related to DACA. They read: “Immigrant power. Immigrant rights;” “My parents’ dream for me should not be my nightmare. Defend DACA. Citizenship NOW;” and “DACA must stay!”⁴¹



It was notable to me that MALDEF’s posts were much more text- and graphic-heavy, rather than photograph-forward. This speaks to the organization’s priorities as a civil rights litigation nonprofit: most of its staff are attorneys and most attention is paid to cases. As a result, less emphasis seems to be placed on communications and social media work—there is no unified “brand look,” there are repeat posts, and the text is always more important than the visual

⁴⁰ MALDEF, [MALDEF History May 8, 2018], @Maldefian, May 8, 2024.

⁴¹ MALDEF, [DACA Protest, Immigrant Power], @Maldefian, February 12, 2024.

elements. This also may reflect MALDEF's status as an established organization that does not rely on the younger generations for support in the same way that my other case study, Voto Latino, might. Finally, including images of "real" people sends a visual message about who MALDEF works to defend. Because of this, it may have an incentive to use graphics and images that do not center people in order to appeal to a wider audience and be seen as a more inclusive and representative nonprofit.

In these images below, however, real people are depicted, and many of them are younger in age. DACA is incredibly significant in the scope of MALDEF's work, and perhaps the choice to include real images from DACA-related demonstrations aims to underscore this. Additionally, the use of these images from a real-life event may also speak to MALDEF's ostensible presence at the event in order to take these photos, and therefore its commitment to the cause of DACA.

Voting Rights

Compared to its posts about immigration, MALDEF was substantially less partisan or anti-Trump when posting about voting rights. In terms of content, many of the posts were concerned with Latino voting strength and the ability to cast an effective vote. Most of these cases concerned instances of redistricting in ways that silenced Latinos' abilities to elect the candidate of their choice—whether to a school board or local government. Aside from these cases, many voting-related posts concerned the election, and served as reminders to make a plan to vote. MALDEF also created some voting guides and resources, as well, so there was an education element occasionally. These resources were advertised as being available in both English and Spanish, which is interesting, particularly when all of MALDEF's social media presence is in English. Additionally, in 2020, attention was paid to federal government and national politics, through letters that MALDEF signed onto with the Leadership Conference for

Civil and Human Rights, and a letter it wrote to congressional leadership. Many posts focused on historical dates and events, commemorating various political events, laws, and court cases. Finally, most of the state-level posts related to voting rights concerned Arizona, California, Texas, and Washington state. Some throughlines that came to light through my qualitative analyses concerned population growth and statistics, democracy, and Latino identity.

Voting rights posts in 2016 were twice as negative as positive, in line with the majority-negative trend overall in MALDEF's communications. However, the year 2020 featured twice as many positive posts (10) as negative ones (five). This may be due to the pandemic and an effort on the part of MALDEF to highlight positive events in light of difficult times. Regarding which level of government was discussed, federal voting rights issues were most posted about in 2020. State-level issues were most common in 2024, though overall were the least-talked about (10) as compared to local (29) and federal (30). Local-level voting rights issues most frequently appeared in 2016. This year also included the most references to the population growth and potential voting power of Latinos, which is interesting to think about in the context of advocacy nonprofits mobilizing around Hillary Clinton's candidacy and the Democratic party for an election that swung the other way, in favor of Trump. Frequent references to Latino growth and the Latino vote directly related to my discussion of the Census and attention to population statistics in Latino politics over time in chapter two. This did not seem to be significant in 2020 or 2024, however. Below is a table that shows these subcode references from my analysis.

Figure 3.5: Subcodes for Analysis of MALDEF's Voting Rights-Related Posts

MALDEF Voting Rights	2016	2020	2024	Total
Positive	13	10	5	28
Negative	26	5	6	37
Neutral	4	12	4	20
Federal	1	24	5	30
State	4	0	6	10
Local	22	3	4	29
Partisan	0	0	0	0
Policy-Specific	0	0	0	0
Anti-Trump	0	0	0	0
Solidarity	0	9	0	9
Population Growth	8	1	2	11

Population Growth and Statistics

MALDEF has consistently been concerned with the population growth and statistics of the Latino population. During the 2010 Census, MALDEF President Thomas Saenz argued that “being counted in the Census is so critical to all Latinos and to the communities in which they live,” and thanked the nonprofit’s partners (including Voto Latino) for working to reach as many people as possible, finally stressing “the singular importance of having all Latinos be counted.”⁴² In chapter two, I outlined the history of this interest in demographics in the context of Latino group politics, and how leaders wielded population statistics to demand greater political representation.

In many of its cases, MALDEF emphasized the prominence and growth of the Latino population: The “Hispanic citizen voting age population” has “grown rapidly;”⁴³ a country

⁴² MALDEF, “MALDEF and Voto Latino Build Momentum for 2010 Census,” *MALDEF* (blog), March 12, 2010, <https://www.maldef.org/2010/03/maldef-and-voto-latino-build-momentum-for-2010-census/>.

⁴³ MALDEF, “Federal Court Clears the Way for MALDEF’s Voting Rights Lawsuit Against Pasadena, Texas, to Move to Trial,” *MALDEF*, August 25, 2016.

redistricted in a way that “divided a politically cohesive Latino community” who “constitute a majority of the eligible voters;”⁴⁴ and a county in Washington “diluted the voting strength of the Latino Community.”⁴⁵ This growth and portrayal of Latino populations as a unified political front bolsters the argument that they are not able to cast effective votes and are being prevented from expressing their full political potential. Similarly, MALDEF highlighted the proportion of Latinos within certain jurisdictions to emphasize the lack of proportional representation. For example, Harris County, Texas, is the third most populous country in the country, and “more than 40 percent of its residents are Latino.”⁴⁶ In another post, Bexar County’s population is estimated to be “60 percent Hispanic.”⁴⁷ After one case, the nonprofit celebrated a court victory in which new maps were implemented to “reflect the growth of the region’s Latino community.”⁴⁸ In 2020, MALDEF posted an image of a golden gavel with the quote: “The size and prominence of the Latino population nationwide is reflected in the Supreme Court dockets of the last ten years; more and more cases before the Court will center on the legal issues faced by the Latino community.”⁴⁹ Across issues of unfair redistricting, at-large election systems, and other voting rights issues, MALDEF asserts the growth and imminent power of Latino voters. The use of population statistics creates numerically based arguments that are harder to dispute.

⁴⁴ MALDEF, “Federal Court Rejects Kern County Motion, Permitting Voting Rights Suit to Continue Toward Resolution,” *MALDEF*, September 7, 2016.

⁴⁵ MALDEF, [Diluted the voting strength of the Latino Community], @Maldefian, March 16, 2024.

⁴⁶ MALDEF, “MALDEF Demands Texas Counties Stop Providing False Voter ID Information,” *MALDEF*, November 4, 2016.

⁴⁷ MALDEF, “MALDEF Files Lawsuit in Texas Challenging Bexar County’s Implementation of Illegal Voter ID Law,” *MALDEF*, October 29, 2016.

⁴⁸ MALDEF, [Another win for Latino voters], @Maldefian, April 3, 2024.

⁴⁹ MALDEF, [The size and prominence of the Latino population], @Maldefian, September 26, 2020.

Related to this attention to population growth, and as mentioned in the beginning of this section, MALDEF has been very vocal about the value of participating in the Census: “Getting our entire community counted will help to ensure that elected representatives respond to our community’s needs. To avoid exclusion, we must get ourselves included in the Census. Our strength is in numbers, and our numbers must be in the Census.”⁵⁰ MALDEF ties the importance of population statistics to political power and offers the Census as a mechanism to achieve this political power. Establishing the growth and size of Latinos gives weight to MALDEF as an organization fighting on behalf of Latino communities and adds to the significance of the group within the broader US population. Its wielding of these population statistics flexes Latinos’ potential power and voting strength as a collective—that is, based on the assumption that there are cohesive political preferences and goals across the group. Moreover, MALDEF’s use of statistics is often to illustrate the need for change in order to establish equal and fair representation, and rectifying election systems and districting plans that disproportionately render Latino populations’ votes ineffective.

Democracy

In a similar vein, there was a lot of focus on democracy in MALDEF’s messaging about voting rights. On the one hand, this is to be expected from a civil rights litigation nonprofit. However, I found it particularly interesting in the framing of democracy within a conversation about Latino civil rights and Latino identity. Many mentions of democracy served to delineate a community in solidarity with one another, in the pursuit of the same political goals. In a commemoration of the March on Washington in 1963, MALDEF wrote that the “Latino march today is a figurative march to the polls, a literal march to the mailbox or the drop-box, or to vote safely in person. *Latinos will demand elected leadership that respects our history, our present,*

⁵⁰ MALDEF, [Make sure every person is counted in the 2020 Census], @Maldefian, May 28, 2020.

and our future” (emphasis added).⁵¹ There are many instances where possessive pronouns like “our” are used, also adding to the community effect. On the fifty-fifth anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act, MALDEF posted that “we’re still fighting modern-day forms of voter suppression,” and that “Our democracy can’t wait.”⁵² By building up this sense of community, and then stressing the importance of democracy, MALDEF links the group of people who belong to this community with democracy. In other words, by invoking responsibility to community and the inherent political ties between the Latino individual and the Latino community, MALDEF tries to create a personal stake for its followers and persuade them that they, too, have a stake in democracy.

By defining this community and galvanizing Latinos around issues like voting rights, MALDEF also imbues a sense of urgency and invokes time to underscore the impending growth and power of Latinos politically. Commemorating the 19th Amendment, which granted American women the right to vote, MALDEF said “it’s time to make real the promise of the 19th Amendment,” and committed to being “forward-looking” in its efforts.⁵³ In response to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s voter suppression tactics, the organization argued that his efforts were an “anti-democratic response to a new or emerging electoral majority.”⁵⁴ Here, the future of Latino political power is invoked, and the grounds were built for the case of a unified front against such attacks. These “efforts undermine our electoral democracy.”⁵⁵ Throughout these posts—and particularly regarding the Census and general elections—MALDEF urges its

⁵¹ MALDEF, [The Latino march today is a figurative march], @Maldefian, August 30, 2020.

⁵² MALDEF, [Today MALDEF marks 55 years since President Johnson], @Maldefian, August 6, 2020.

⁵³ MALDEF, [It’s time to make real the promise of the 19th Amendment], @Maldefian, August 27, 2020.

⁵⁴ MALDEF, [Texas AG Ken Paxton’s voter suppression], @Maldefian, October 15, 2024.

⁵⁵ MALDEF, [Undermine our electoral democracy], @Maldefian, October 15, 2024.

constituents to “make sure your voice is heard.”⁵⁶ Using “our” to create a sense of community and collective action is an attempt to make readers feel as though they, too, have a personal stake in this issue, and in American democracy more broadly. The use of statistics and time adds to a sense of urgency and an impetus for action in the wake of all of these injustices.

Latino Identity: Civil Rights and Solidarity

Just as with immigrants’ rights and immigration, descriptions of Latino identity were a focal point in my analysis of MALDEF’s voting rights content. In 2016, it used the terms “Latino,” “Latina,” and “Hispanic.” Neither 2020 nor 2024 mentioned “Hispanic.” Often, however, mentions of Latinos would occur within a few sentences of phrases like “the right of all people across the US to be represented by their officials,”⁵⁷ or protecting the right to vote “for all citizens, regardless of race,” and ensuring equal representation for “all communities across the country.”⁵⁸ This pattern may speak to MALDEF’s desire to resonate with Latino constituents and a broader US audience.

In 2020, terminology included “voters of color,” “people of color,” “communities of color,” “historically marginalized citizens,” “Latino,” and one reference of “Latinx” (which was in a letter from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights that MALDEF signed onto).⁵⁹ This sort of language suggests an attention to broad and inclusive language that acknowledges power systems and the role of systemic racism in the US. Community becomes a stand-in for a wider population and even for the country in its entirety. In response to a court

⁵⁶ MALDEF, [Make sure your voice is heard], @Maldefian, November 4, 2024.

⁵⁷ MALDEF, “MALDEF Acclaims Supreme Court Decision,” *MALDEF*, April 5, 2016.

⁵⁸ MALDEF, “MALDEF Demands City of La Mirada Change Its At-Large Election System,” *MALDEF*, August 3, 2016.

⁵⁹ MALDEF, [Leadership Conference letter], @Maldefian, April 9, 2020.

ruling, President Thomas Saenz stated MALDEF warned governments that they did not “get to ignore huge portions of the community.”⁶⁰ Commemorations of historical events that include statistics mean that MALDEF is linking Latino identity to both historical events, as well as tying it to a future in which Latinos have realized greater political representation and power.

Finally, 2024 discussed “Latino voters” and the “Latino population,” as well as a “new or emerging electoral majority,” which was not linked to Latino identity explicitly but was linked to it implicitly. Again, the attention to population growth and demographic shifts is used to signal the impending political significance of the group. Interestingly, in reference to scandalous events like noncitizens voting illegally, MALDEF did not employ any identity descriptors or identity-based language. This is likely an attempt to distance these sensationalist stories from the Latino population and avoid fueling the idea that noncitizens are voting en masse. Similarly, MALDEF wrote that “Texas’s zeal to find *non-existent non-citizen voters* has ended up knocking some lawful voters off the rolls and endangering their right to cast a vote” (emphasis added).⁶¹ Another instance in which Latino identity was not invoked was in a post reading “find out how hard it was for one US citizen to get her vote back.”⁶² Here, US citizenship was the primary identifier, emphasizing the clear right to vote, and thus the injustice of having one’s vote suppressed.

Conclusion

One of my research questions asks how nonprofits have dealt with a diversifying Latino population, and how their communication strategies have changed over time. Immigration has become an increasingly politicized issue in the United States. As a defender of DACA and

⁶⁰ MALDEF, [The ruling is a warning to local governments], @Maldefian, May 27, 2020.

⁶¹ MALDEF, [Texas’s zeal to find non-existent non-citizen voters], @Maldefian, October 29, 2024.

⁶² MALDEF, [Find out how hard it was for one US citizen], @Maldefian, October 29, 2024.

immigrants' rights, MALDEF must navigate how to communicate about issues that have become more politicized and controversial with time. Trump's racist rhetoric which links Latinos to unauthorized immigration perhaps has pushed MALDEF to avoid linking Latinos with some of their legal cases dealing with DACA and other anti-immigrant injustices.

This chapter has demonstrated how MALDEF did indeed expand its description of Latinos as a group it works to represent. As an organization that was founded as and continues to be a legal defense group, MALDEF has also expanded the group it aims to represent. While its language in the 1960s focused on the rights of Mexican Americans, chapter two outlined how the work of Black advocacy movements influenced a shift in MALDEF's initial focus on particular nationalities and ethnicities, to a national panethnic category: Latinos. This shift to the national sphere has continued to the present. It has prioritized voting rights and immigration cases, which have become more salient under Trump's presidencies and subsequent attacks on voting rights. MALDEF positions itself as a defender of Latino—and broader—civil rights, working so that individuals may enjoy their full civil rights without having to take action themselves.

MALDEF exemplifies how organizations have changed the language they use to discuss Latinos over time. Even within the years of my study, the tone and messaging for different issues, and the specific terminology used, varied according to the political moment. I believe this illustrates the fact that ethnoracial construction in America—as it relates to Latinos, as well as other racialized groups—is an ongoing project that continues to evolve and is dependent upon cultural, political, and temporal contexts.

CHAPTER 4: MOBILIZING AND INSPIRING NEW GENERATIONS — VOTO LATINO’S COMMUNICATIONS

Voto Latino CEO María Teresa Kumar spoke at the Democratic National Convention in August 2024, proclaiming, “When Latinos vote, Democrats win! Now, they’re trying to suppress our vote, our sacred and universal right as Americans. So let me be clear: Voto Latino has registered 1.5 million voters. This year, more Latinos will vote than any time in our history. So that means, *sí se puede, ¡se está haciendo!*” (It can be done; it is being done!)¹ Kumar is painting a picture of Latinos as a politically cohesive—and Democratic—voting bloc that is ever-growing and increasingly powerful. In light of Donald Trump’s victory in November 2024, political pundits and social scientists have been trying to make sense of what happened. For an organization like Voto Latino, working to mobilize and register young Latinos to vote, these implications are crucial.

In this chapter, I analyze my second case study organization, Voto Latino. I look at the organization’s Instagram posts from the years 2016, 2020, and 2024, and I conduct a text analysis in order to address my research questions. Within the scope of my sample and my initial results, I focus on the two issue areas of immigrants’ rights and immigration and voting rights. In my analysis of MALDEF in chapter three, I found that MALDEF broadened its description of the groups it protects over time, and that most of its communications were negative in emotional tone. My central findings about Voto Latino stand somewhat in contrast. While MALDEF started out as an organization catering to Mexican Americans, Voto Latino has always been centered around “Latinos” as a group, and younger generations in particular. Like MALDEF, it has also expanded its definition of the group it works on behalf of, through terminology like “Latinx” and

¹ *María Teresa Kumar Speaks at 2024 Democratic National Convention*, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptrFL923P9w>.

“Latine,” two gender-inclusive terms. Second, I find that Voto Latino’s communications are consistently positive in emotional tone in order to galvanize followers and encourage them to take action. In order to do this, Voto Latino must inspire hope and positivity in order to mobilize people to register to vote and engage with its work, whereas MALDEF’s goal is to underscore the threats at play and its value as a civil rights organization fighting on behalf of its constituents.

Background on Voto Latino

Voto Latino was founded in 2004 by María Teresa Kumar and began as a get-out-the-vote initiative from MTV.² The nonprofit organization was founded with the goal of persuading the public and political leaders that the Latino vote was significant and warranted attention. Kumar said the challenge was to combat stereotypes—for example, that “Latinos didn’t speak English, weren’t using social platforms (in fact, they were early adopters of Myspace, Twitter, and Instagram), and are concerned only about immigration.” She pointed out that Latinos are “interested in the same issues that are important to many other Americans, including education, health care, and the environment.”³ At the center of the organization’s strategy are younger generations: Kumar saw that the children of immigrants were “doing adult things long before they turned 18,” and had “taken on leadership roles in their own homes.”⁴ The question, then, was how to mobilize this large population of young people to register and vote. Kumar’s solution was to use a combination of technology, social media, and the sway of celebrities to motivate younger generations.

² Mari Megias, “Voto Latino and the American Dream: Maria Teresa Kumar MPP 2001 HKSEE 2004 Is Convincing Public Leaders the Latino Vote Matters,” April 27, 2017, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/more/alumni/alumni-stories/voto-latino-and-american-dream>.

³ Megias.

⁴ Megias.

Today, Voto Latino is the largest Latino voter registration organization in the country. It focuses on “educating and empowering a new generation of Latinx voters” through “digital campaigns, culturally relevant programs and authentic voices” in order to help the “Latinx community” realize its full “political power.”⁵ From the organizational language, it is notable that they employ the term “Latinx,” which, as noted in chapter two, is less popular and even controversial among Latinos. This likely speaks to Voto Latino’s orientation toward younger Latino citizens, who they believe may be more familiar with “Latinx” and more supportive of it for its inclusivity than older generations.

In 2020, Voto Latino set the record for the highest Latino voter registration in history, officially registering 1,057,090 Latinos.⁶ In response to this milestone, CEO Kumar said that Latinos have been “ignored by the political establishment” for too long, and that these results “reflect the Latinx community’s deep desire to participate in this election”—in 2020, Latinos were the second-largest voting bloc in the nation.⁷ An estimated 16.6 million Latinos voted in the general election, a 30 percent increase from the 2016 election. Compared to all other racial groups, Latino turnout was 15.9 percent higher than in 2016. Young, first-time Latino voters aged 18-29 powered the flip from red to blue in states Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, North Carolina, Nevada, and Virginia.⁸

⁵ Voto Latino, “About Voto Latino,” Voto Latino, <https://votolatino.org/about/>.

⁶ Voto Latino, “Voto Latino Registers the Most Latinx Voters in History, Surpassing One Million Registered Voters; Raises \$35 Million and Mobilizes 3.7 Million Latinx Voters for 2020,” Voto Latino, October 12, 2020, <https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/voto-latino-registers-the-most-latinx-voters-in-history-surpassing-one-million-registered-voters-raises-35-million-and-mobilizes-3-7-million-latinx-voters-for-2020/>.

⁷ Voto Latino.

⁸ “Why Vote? Voto Latino,” Voto Latino, <https://votolatino.org/why-vote/>.

Voto Latino’s “Why Vote” webpage walks users through the importance of voting. Toward the top, it reads: “Our collective power lies in our ability to make our voices heard. The single most effective way to have your voice heard is by voting... Latines are the fastest growing demographic in the United States, and with that growth comes the power to impact the decisions being made at all levels of government. If we vote, organize, and fight for the things we believe in, with our numbers, we can effect real change.”⁹ Here, the organization uses the term “Latine,” another gender-inclusive descriptor. Repeated throughout this statement is the theme of the Latino vote as a cohesive and potentially powerful force. Below is a table from the “Why Vote” page that illustrates Latino voter turnout in the 2020 general election by age, with the darkest blue signaling the age group that made up the largest percentage of the Latino vote in each state. In over half of the states presented, Latinos aged 18-29 made up the majority of Latino voters.

Figure 4.1: Breakdown of 2020 Latinx Turnout by Age and State

State	Age 18 - 29	Age 30 - 39	Age 40 - 49	Age 50 - 59	Age 60+
AZ	27.5%	19.2%	16.5%	14.9%	21.5%
CO	26.2%	20.3%	16.7%	14.7%	22.1%
FL	16.7%	17.3%	18.2%	19.3%	28.5%
GA	31.4%	20.2%	17.8%	16.1%	14.5%
NC	34.2%	19.4%	17.0%	15.2%	14.2%
NM	16.3%	17.2%	16.1%	17.0%	33.5%
NV	29.8%	21.2%	16.4%	15.1%	17.6%
PA	19.5%	21.1%	20.0%	18.7%	20.6%
TX	21.2%	18.6%	18.1%	17.1%	25.0%
VA	24.3%	19.6%	19.6%	18.1%	18.4%
WI	12.5%	22.2%	22.0%	20.8%	22.5%

Source: “Why Vote,” Voto Latino

⁹ “Why Vote? Voto Latino.”

Finally, the web page concludes with a nod toward the future: by 2032, the population of Latinos who are eligible to vote in the South will have increased by two-thirds.¹⁰ While “Latinx voters” make up the second largest voting population in the country, there are “even more Latinx individuals” who are eligible to vote but not yet registered to do so. This web page makes Voto Latino’s case for why voting on an individual level matters for Latinos, tying the individual to this broader group that is only growing in numbers as time goes on. To emphasize this and the importance of the Latino vote, the page ends with statistics that illustrate the continuing and increasing importance of this particular electorate.

While Voto Latino was extremely active in the lead-up to the 2024 general election, and has been active on Instagram since Election Day, the website has not been updated with additional statistics and information about the organization’s work in 2024.

With regard to my two case study organizations and their relationship to one another, I chose to look at MALDEF because it is an established institution dating back to the 1960s, with a well-regarded, national reputation. Since it is a civil rights litigation group, I chose to look at Voto Latino because it is a voter registration and advocacy group. MALDEF’s name reflects a hard-earned reputation, while Voto Latino is a relatively new organization. Although these two organizations engage in different work, they both work on behalf of Latinos in the United States and seek to address many of the same issues. In fact, they are partner organizations.¹¹ In 2010, the two nonprofits worked together to educate Latinos on the importance of participating in the US Census, combining “Voto Latino’s award-winning web platform and peer-to-peer mobile

¹⁰ “Why Vote? Voto Latino.”

¹¹ MALDEF, “MALDEF and Voto Latino Build Momentum for 2010 Census,” *MALDEF* (blog), March 12, 2010, <https://www.maldef.org/2010/03/maldef-and-voto-latino-build-momentum-for-2010-census/>.

campaigns” with MALDEF’s “trusted brand and longtime service to the community” in order to reach “Latinos of all ages.”¹²

Methods

As with my analysis of MALDEF in chapter two, I look at Voto Latino’s Instagram posts in order to evaluate its public-facing communications in the three most recent election years and describe change over time. I wrote a Python script to pull the relevant posts from @VotoLatino and then went through the same methodological steps I outlined in chapter two to create a sample of 65 posts per year. After the first round of coding, I look more closely at the four issue areas of (1) education, (2) freedom from open and obvious bias and discrimination, (3) immigrants’ rights and immigration, and (4) voting rights. After conducting a second round of closer analysis across these four issues, immigrants’ rights and immigration and voting rights stood out as the most-referenced issues. In light of this, I conducted a third level of analysis, closely reading the posts tagged to these two issues for all three years of my Voto Latino sample.

A Closer Look: Voto Latino on Immigration and Voting Rights

Overall, my focused research into Voto Latino immigrants’ rights and immigration and voting rights posts yielded several recurring themes: (1) mobilizing community through appeals of urgency, and solidarity; (2) the dangers and consequences of Trump; (3) a focus on demography and democracy; (4) individual and collective power; and (5) Latino identity, expansive community, and community agency and responsibility. The following sections will unpack these sub-themes as they relate to each of these two issue areas.

Immigrants’ Rights and Immigration

Within my analysis of Voto Latino’s Instagram posts concerned with immigrants’ rights and immigration, I uncovered several throughlines. The three key themes that I identified are (1)

¹² MALDEF.

mobilizing community through appeals of urgency, and solidarity; (2) the dangers and consequences of Trump; and (3) Latino identity through the lens of community agency and responsibility. I also observed some changes over the three years. In 2016, there were few references to immigration (16 references), but the content can be categorized as attempts to be personal and relatable. It focuses on individuals and shows real people related to the organization's work. In 2020, I noticed a step up in terms of coherent brand design and much more content explicitly related to immigration and immigrant rights (71 references). It features many more text-based images and fewer photographs of individuals, though it does highlight the ways in which policy affects individuals' lives. Spanish is not uncommon either alongside or instead of English captions and text graphics, and there is a lot of emphasis on the contributions of undocumented immigrants to the economy and society through taxes and labor. Additionally, the organization discussed the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of community, neighborhood, and family, and the responsibility and agency of Latinos to care for one another. There was more of a focus on federal policy and policymakers than at the local or state level.

Finally, 2024 featured a lot of positive spins of even negative events, attempting to be uplifting and encouraging rather than depressing and pessimistic. This year featured the most content (192 references) on immigration, as well as on police brutality and unjust immigration systems and policies. There was also more political content: fact-checking Trump's claims, uplifting Biden's policy in comparison to Trump, and language suggesting that once Latinos understood what was at stake, they would vote against Trump. Voto Latino endorsed both Biden's 2024 reelection campaign and Harris's presidential campaign.¹³ While drawing stark

¹³ Voto Latino, "Voto Latino Endorses Joe Biden and Kamala Harris for Reelection," Voto Latino, March 9, 2024, <https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/voto-latino-endorses-joe-biden-and-kamala-harris-for-reelection/>; Voto Latino, "Voto Latino Endorses Vice President Kamala Harris for President," Voto Latino, July 21, 2024,

comparisons at times, MALDEF did not explicitly endorse Biden or Harris, and tended to avoid overt political statements, as a nonprofit with 501(c)(3) status. Voto Latino's posts displayed language about the threat to democracy, the future, and safety that Trump poses to Latinos; the use of "we" and collectivizing language; and the emphasis on the tangible consequences of Trump's rhetoric. Lastly, in terms of policy, there was more of an emphasis on border policy, emphasizing the need for a safe and secure border that is also more just and humane.

Below is a table breaking down the codes I used to look at the four more focused issue areas outlined in the previous chapter. I looked at whether the tone of the post was positive (i.e., a celebratory spotlight of a Latino leader), negative (i.e., an instance of anti-immigrant rhetoric), or neutral (i.e., an attorney providing an update on the facts of a case) in terms of emotional content; at what level (federal, state, or local) the event at hand was taking place; whether the content was partisan, related to a particular policy, expressing anti-Trump sentiment, expressing solidarity, invoking statistics or language about the growth of the Latino population; and whether immigration-related content was being tied to issues around education in addition. Overall, Voto Latino had significantly more positive-toned posts than negative ones, with the exception of 2024, when it posted 35 negative posts and 12 positive ones.

<https://votolatino.org/media/press-releases/voto-latino-endorses-vice-president-kamala-harris-for-president/>.

Figure 4.2: Subcodes for Analysis of Voto Latino's Immigration-Related Posts

Voto Latino Immigration	2016	2020	2024	Total
Positive	4	8	21	33
Negative	0	12	35	47
Neutral	0	2	2	4
Federal	2	17	36	55
State	0	0	4	4
Local	2	5	18	25
Partisan	2	4	15	21
Policy-Specific	2	14	17	33
Anti-Trump	2	11	26	39
Solidarity	4	9	21	34
Population Growth Stats	1	1	0	2
Ties to Education	4	2	5	11

Mobilizing Community: Urgency and Solidarity

Voto Latino used the appeals of urgency and solidarity to engage its viewers and constituents across all three years. In 2016, the organization posted a graphic that read “My ____ would benefit from DAPA,” a program the Obama administration launched in 2014 for the parents of US citizens.¹⁴ This fill-in-the-black statement provokes viewers to consider their own lives, making this policy issue more personal and giving constituents a greater stake in it. In the same year, public school students in Washington, DC staged a protest against the election of Donald Trump. The image features two groups of students raising up home-made signs—one of them is a drawing of the United States with “Immigrants” written across it in all capitals. The caption ends with “#blacklivesmatter  #HereToStay #WeStandWithYou.”¹⁵ Voto Latino squarely aligns itself with the Black Lives Matter movement, thus linking the Latino civil rights

¹⁴ Voto Latino, [“My ____ would benefit from DAPA”], @VotoLatino, April 17, 2016.

¹⁵ Voto Latino, [DC students protest Trump’s election], @VotoLatino, November 16, 2016.

movement with the struggles of other marginalized groups in the country. Many of the organization's posts are positive and meant to be uplifting and celebratory. For example, it wished “our Cancer queen on SCOTUS, Sonia Sotomayor” a happy birthday, and thanked her for “consistently pursuing justice for immigrants and people of color.”¹⁶ Similarly, after the 2024 election, it launched a “12 days of Latino wins” campaign, highlighting achievements from various people.



Voto Latino often writes about Latino neighborhoods, families, and communities. This sense of group identity is used to mobilize people to come together around a common goal. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it asked constituents to keep wearing their masks and “protect our neighborhoods,” because “looking out for our loved ones is a part of our culture.”¹⁷ It asked people to stay protected at “our tienditas” and “bodegas,” claiming that “we gotta protect

¹⁶ Voto Latino, [Happy birthday Sonia Sotomayor], @VotoLatino, June 26, 2020.

¹⁷ Voto Latino, [Looking out for our loved ones is a part of our culture], @VotoLatino, May 20, 2020.

ourselves and educate each other.”¹⁸ Here, Spanish language, or Spanglish, serves to build a community and cultural appeal. The use of informal language, like “we gotta,” perhaps makes the organization seem more familiar and relatable to younger generations. Similarly, in a post praising US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the organization thanked her for “never backing down and standing up to the rich white men filling up our government.”¹⁹ This humorous, blunt remark about the “rich white men” in government is also likely meant to appeal to younger generations—particularly since Ocasio-Cortez is also a younger Representative and has a large social media following and a pop culture presence.

This solidarity appeal is carried across both positively toned and negatively toned posts. When discussing Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s targeting of immigrant-serving nonprofits—which MALDEF covered in a rather negative way—Voto Latino chose a more positive spin, leading with “El Paso leaders rally around migrant shelters after Attorney General Ken Paxton’s threat to shut them down.”²⁰ Focusing on the agency and action of community leaders is meant to motivate viewers to feel empowered to act and hopefully engage with Voto Latino’s work. It posted about #IStandWithImmigrants Day of Action as an event that “empowers immigrants and allies to share their stories,” asking followers to “join us and share why you stand with immigrants.”²¹ Once again, seeking out personal stories humanizes the issues at hand and gives people more of a stake in the work to address said issues.

¹⁸ Voto Latino.

¹⁹ Voto Latino, [AOC standing up to rich white men], @VotoLatino, October 28, 2020.

²⁰ MALDEF, [Paxton is going after non-profits he disagrees with], @Malefian, August 16, 2020; Voto Latino, [El Paso leaders rally], @VotoLatino, February 26, 2020.

²¹ Voto Latino, [#IStandWithImmigrants Day of Action], October 15, 2024.’

Urgent tones are also used to motivate constituents. One post asserted that “We still have to be loud and advocate with and for immigrants... let’s try to get justice for all of our immigrant people.”²² The use of “we” and “our” builds the notion of a collective community fighting for a common goal. It also places “immigrant people” into the community, acknowledging the overlap between Latinos and immigrants. Similarly, another post noted that “Our communities are going through a lot right now, an anti-immigrant government, pandemic, and police brutality. We need to take care of each other. 1 in 4 Latina high school students have thought about suicide. We have to talk about mental health without stigma. The adults in our community need to be there for the young folks.”²³ This example highlights the use of collectivizing language such as the “we” pronoun; creates a sense of urgency by underscoring issues like mental health crises that are facing Latinos; and speaks across generations, arguing that the elders must look out for the youth.

Trump: Dangers and Consequences

Voto Latino also used this strategy in its characterizations of Trump, particularly to underscore the impacts of his policy. One post from the time of the “Muslim Ban” in 2020 featured a Tweet with images of a small boy and the words “This is my nephew Yussef. He’s 7 years old. He lives in Baghdad with my sister... this kid is amazing... He loves comic books and video games. This is who will be affected.”²⁴ It is interesting to note that this post refers to a child in Baghdad. Voto Latino’s decision to share this particular story (rather than a story from someone in Latin America, for example) speaks to its efforts to both sound the alarm and broaden the groups of people on whose behalf it works. Sharing this story highlights the real-life

²² Voto Latino, [We still have to be loud and advocate], @VotoLatino, July 14, 2020.

²³ Voto Latino, [Our communities are going through a lot right now], @VotoLatino, June 26, 2020.

²⁴ Voto Latino, [This is my nephew Yussef], @VotoLatino, January 6, 2020.

impact of Trump’s policy—“this dehumanization”—through an emotional appeal.²⁵ Similarly, at the end of President Trump’s first term in office, the nonprofit wrote that while he may be leaving, the work is “nowhere near done,” as “migrant children are still being traumatized by his cruel and vile immigration policies. 666 migrant children are still separated from their parents and lawyers are unable to locate them.”²⁶ The post serves as a call to action in the wake of an emotional appeal that shows the human consequences of Trump’s policy that last beyond his term in office.

Throughout his 2024 presidential campaign, Voto Latino condemned Trump’s comments and lies. One post, shown below, addressed a comment Trump made about immigrants, to which Voto Latino responded: “¡Oye, Trompas! We are the people. We hear you. We see you. We will vote to keep you out of office.”²⁷ This caption builds solidarity and uses references to the Constitution to underscore that Latinos are Americans, and to rally the community around voting to keep Trump and his harmful rhetoric out of office. While sending a strong message of solidarity and collective power, Voto Latino still uses humor and Spanish to keep the message lighthearted and encouraging. After the presidential debate, one post stated that “his fictions” about immigration are “deeply dangerous for Latino communities throughout the country. When the leader of the Republican Party says that masses of Latino people represent a threat to America’s safety, it is an unambiguous signal to his supporters to question every member of our community.”

²⁵ Voto Latino.

²⁶ Voto Latino, [666 children are still separated], @VotoLatino, November 9, 2020.

²⁷ Voto Latino, [¡Oye, Trompas! We are the people], @VotoLatino, March 18, 2024.



In addition to demonstrating the consequences of Trump’s policy and his deceitful rhetoric, Voto Latino emphasized the threat Trump posed to democracy in the 2024 election cycle. He was depicted as a “threat to Latinos”²⁸ and a “committed enemy of our democracy,” and that “only by casting a ballot against Trump can [voters] protect and save our democracy.”²⁹ The nonprofit explicitly compared the benefits to Latinos under the Biden Administration with the policy proposals during Trump’s campaign and argued that the “future and safety of Latinos, immigrants, and all vulnerable communities hang on the line.”³⁰ Similar to MALDEF, Voto Latino invoked democracy to engage its constituents around the dangers of Trump. Unlike MALDEF—which used the democracy threat as a means of legitimizing its work and importance as an organization—however, Voto Latino used this tactic to mobilize viewers to get registered to vote, and to cast their ballots and take action.

²⁸ Voto Latino, [Trump is a threat to Latinos], @VotoLatino, May 8, 2024.

²⁹ Voto Latino, [Committed enemy of our democracy], @VotoLatino, June 28, 2024.

³⁰ Voto Latino, [Latinos know that MAGA is bad], @VotoLatino, May 8, 2024.

Latino Identity: Community Agency and Responsibility

In 2016, there were very few references to immigrants' rights or immigration, and what did appear was often in relation to other struggles for civil rights, thus taking on a message of solidarity. In 2020, the language included terms like "people of color," "Black and brown folks," and discussed immigrants, used Spanish, and highlighted personal stories. The use of the term "folks" and language like "Black and brown communities" may be an attempt to be more inclusive of a wider range of identities and is very much in line with organizational and colloquial language shifts after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. In 2024, this trend continued: posts emphasized Latino families, communities, and voters; immigrant communities; "undocumented folks;" and "all vulnerable communities." Overall, these posts tended to highlight immigrant contributions to the US economy (through labor and taxes—and comparing this with Trump, who has notoriously paid no taxes), and community agency and responsibility for affecting change. In a post about receiving federal assistance during Covid-19, the information opened with "Mis compañeros. Esto es lo que necesitan saber" (My comrades. This is what you need to know).³¹ The post provides followers with the information needed to then take action on behalf of themselves, their families, and their broader communities.



Undocumented immigrants pay more
taxes than Trump.

And they pay every year.

I often observed language that assumed Latinos' political preferences. When discussing the election in 2024, Voto Latino put out statements like "When Latino voters understand exactly

³¹ Voto Latino, [Mis compañeros], @VotoLatino, April 3, 2020.

what is on the ballot, a sizable majority will vote for democracy. When we show how the issues they care about—immigration, abortion, the safety of them and their families—will be affected, they will understand exactly what’s at stake this year;”³² and “Latinos know that MAGA is bad for our communities.”³³ The message across these examples is that with complete information, the majority of Latinos will make the same decision in terms of casting their ballot.

In 2016, 66 percent of Latinos voted for Hillary Clinton, while 28 percent voted for Donald Trump.³⁴ In 2020, 66 percent voted for Joe Biden and 32 percent cast their ballots for Trump, an increase of five points to the right.³⁵ In the aftermath of the 2024 election and Donald Trump’s victory over Kamala Harris, news headlines and media outlets were flooded with stories about the Latino vote for Trump, giving the impression that Latino voters significantly shifted to the right, perhaps even delivering Trump to the White House. However, closer analysis reveals that the majority of Latino voters (including men) supported Harris. According to UnidosUS’s Clarissa Martínez de Castro, mainstream exit polls repeatedly got this support wrong due to a sampling issue.³⁶ Political pundits and commentators have yet to come to a consensus on the Latino vote in 2024, and slightly different figures have been proposed to describe partisan splits among the group. According to the American Electorate Poll, Latinos voted for Harris at 62

³² Voto Latino, [When Latino voters understand], @VotoLatino, May 8, 2024.

³³ Voto Latino, [Latinos know that MAGA is bad].

³⁴ CNN, “2016 Election Results: National Exit Polls,” accessed March 11, 2025, <http://2016.elections.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/national/president>.

³⁵ Holly Sonneland, “Chart: How U.S. Latinos Voted in the 2020 Presidential Election,” AS/COA, November 5, 2020, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/chart-how-us-latinos-voted-2020-presidential-election>.

³⁶ UnidosUS, “Hispanic Voters Back Harris over Trump by a 62%-37% Margin.”

percent, while Trump received 37 percent of their vote—a 25-point margin.³⁷ However, the percentage of Republican votes rose five and ten points from 2020 and 2016, respectively.

In 2016, across the broader American electorate, the top four issues voters were concerned with were (1) the economy (84 percent), (2) terrorism (80 percent), (3) foreign policy (75 percent), and (4) healthcare (74 percent).³⁸ In 2024, as I explain below, four of the top five issues related to economic conditions and the cost of living, which is distinct from the previous two national election cycles.

The American Electorate Poll cited (1) cost of living/inflation, (2) jobs and the economy, (3) housing costs, (4) health care costs, and (5) abortion and reproductive rights as the top five issue area priorities among Latino voters in 2024. Sixth was immigration.³⁹ In terms of content and the issue areas that both MALDEF and Voto Latino focus on, none of the top four issues relate to these economic-oriented voter priorities. This may be a signal to these organizations that they need to incorporate voter concerns into their issue-based work in order to activate and resonate with a wider audience. Nonprofits focused on Latino issues may need to be more attentive to Latino voters' concerns.

Voting Rights

The second issue I analyzed is that of voting rights. Overall, the three throughlines I found were (1) demography and democracy, (2) individual and collective power, and (3) Latino identity. In 2016, a lot of posts were images of Voto Latino staff and employees at voter registration events. All the posts I encountered were positive in emotional tone and often used

³⁷ American Electorate Poll, “2024 American Electorate Voter Poll,” accessed March 30, 2025, <https://2024electionpoll.us/>.

³⁸ Pew Research Center, “Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election,” July 7, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/07/4-top-voting-issues-in-2016-election/>.

³⁹ UnidosUS, “Hispanic Voters Back Harris.”

language about making your voice heard. The year included several stories about individuals who were voting for the first time. Overall, the goal seemed to be to encourage people to get excited about the political process and then get involved with it themselves.

In 2020, there were a lot of posts outlining voters' rights, content about saving the United States Postal Service and voting by mail, and a lot of illustrations of all sorts of people encouraging followers to vote. There was also a significant amount of Spanish and Spanglish woven into the texts, as well as testimonials from celebrities. While still largely positive in tone, much of the 2020 content seemed to be in anticipation of obstacles at the ballot box, either from the pandemic and/or voter suppression efforts.

Finally, in 2024, Voto Latino focused on the Latino vote more conceptually. It posted a lot about population statistics and the growth of Latinos in the US, and how these things could be wielded for political influence in elections, both in the present moment and in the future. There were many projections about the number of first-time youth voters in 2016, and a lot of language emphasizing community pride and solidarity. This seemed like an urgent appeal to get as many people voting in the election as possible, particularly in response to Trump being on the Republican ticket. Individual voting power and agency was continuously tied to collective power as a Latino bloc.

Just as with my analysis of immigrants' rights and immigration posts, for voting rights content I also looked at emotional sentiment, level of government, and any other political aspects addressed in each reference. Below is a table detailing my findings as they relate to voting rights.

Figure 4.3: Subcodes for Analysis of Voto Latino's Voting Rights-Related Posts

Voto Latino Voting Rights	2016	2020	2024	Total
Positive	42	63	45	150
Negative	0	2	6	8
Neutral	8	20	8	36
Federal	49	72	54	175
State	4	39	4	47
Local	18	3	2	23
Partisan	1	8	9	18
Policy-Specific	0	16	3	19
Anti-Trump	0	11	17	28
Solidarity	23	48	42	113
Population Growth Stats	0	5	16	21

Demography and Democracy

Demographic statistics and “the Latino vote” were mentioned voting rights posts more than any other issue (i.e., immigration). From talking about the “importance of Latino vote” to “how politicians need to pay attention to people of color’s vote. #POC #peopleofcolor #powerofourvote,” these posts were very much oriented toward Latino demographics and the future of American politics.⁴⁰ The nonprofit was interested in how to “engage more young #Latinos in the political process,” and was excited to share that “Young voters make up the largest Latinx voting bloc in AZ, GA, NV and PA! Our people are coming through! 🙌”⁴¹ Many posts had hard numbers, too: “Mi gente! 32 million Latinx individuals are eligible to vote this year;” and “Every 30 seconds, a Latino youth turns 18 years old. So there are four million young

⁴⁰ Voto Latino [Importance of Latino vote], @VotoLatino, July 26, 2016; Voto Latino [Politicians need to pay attention], @VotoLatino, February 2, 2016.

⁴¹ Voto Latino [Engage more young #Latinos], @VotoLatino, January 7, 2016; Voto Latino [Young voters make up the largest Latinx voting bloc], @VotoLatino, November 6, 2020.

people aging into the electoral base every four years.”⁴² Here, we see a particular emphasis on the next generation of voters, who are Voto Latino’s target audience. This attention to younger Latinos likely also explains a lot of the word choices that the organization makes and the online presence it curates.



The Latino voter population has increased significantly in recent years and has become, on average, younger. The number of eligible Latino voters has grown by 4.7 million since 2018, making up 62 percent of the overall growth of the US voter population.⁴³ Latino voters are younger than eligible voters overall: 33 percent of eligible Latinos are older than 50, compared to 48 percent of the general eligible voter population.⁴⁴ In the US population, 21 percent of eligible voters are between the ages of 18 and 29—among Latinos, this figure is 31 percent.⁴⁵ Latinos

⁴² Voto Latino [Mi gente! 32 million], @VotoLatino, September 24, 2020; Voto Latino, [Every 30 seconds, a Latino youth], @VotoLatino, October 21, 2024.

⁴³ Gabriel R. Sanchez, “Young Latino Voters in the 2024 Election” (Brookings Institution, n.d.), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Brookings-Young-Latinos-Slide-Deck_Sep12_GRS.pdf.

⁴⁴ Jens Manuel Krogstad et al., “Key Facts About Hispanic Eligible Voters in 2024,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), January 10, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/10/key-facts-about-hispanic-eligible-voters-in-2024/>.

⁴⁵ Krogstad et al.

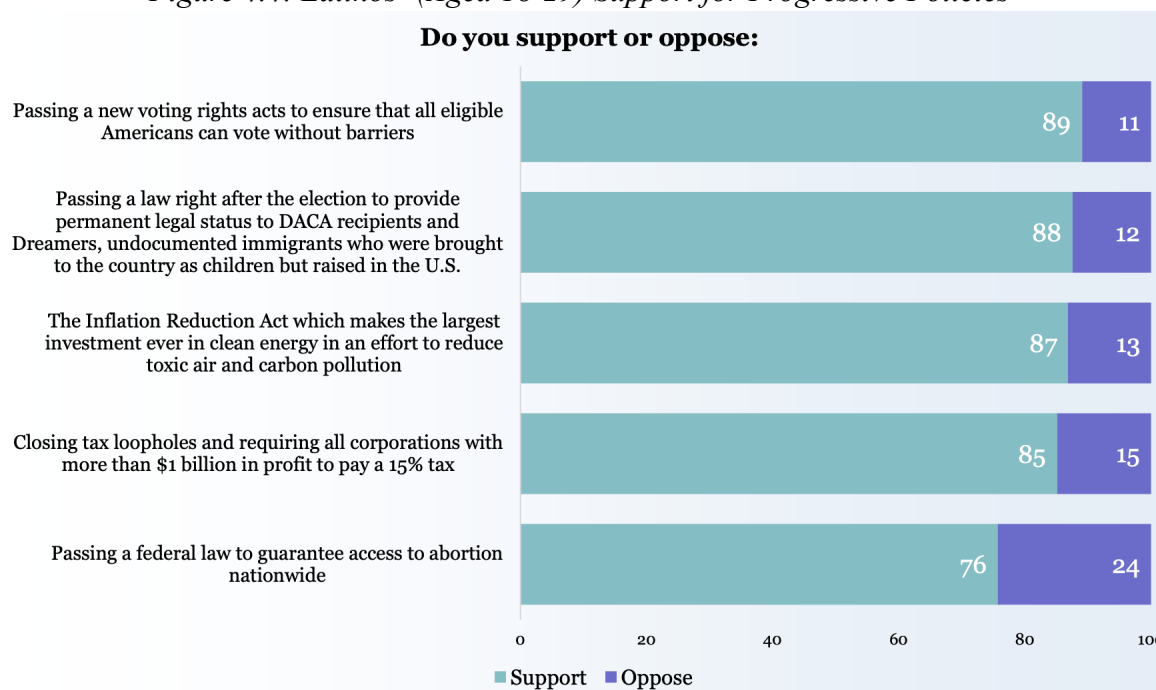
have historically voted Democratic, but recently this has shifted slightly: While just 4 percent of Latinos under 30 say that the Democratic Party is hostile to Latinos, 37 percent believe that Biden and Democrats do not care about the Latino community. On the other hand, over a third of young Latinos believe that Republicans care about Latinos, and Latino men aged 18-29 were nearly split down the middle, with 51 percent supporting Harris and 48 percent voting for Trump in 2024.⁴⁶

While there may be a shift of some kind to the Republican Party, young Latinos still support progressive policies. Below is a chart that depicts young Latinos' (18-29) support for various policies.⁴⁷ Most of these policies contradict many of Trump's proposals, so it is interesting that while the vast majority of this demographic supports these progressive policies, there has still been significant pull to the Republican Party in recent elections. Young Latinos may be casting their ballots less on the basis of specific policies, and more on a subjective sense of which politician cares about people like them.

⁴⁶ Sanchez, "Young Latino Voters."

⁴⁷ Sanchez.

Figure 4.4: Latinos' (Aged 18-29) Support for Progressive Policies



Source: Gabriel R. Sanchez, “Young Latino Voters in the 2024 Election”

Finally, as an electorate, Latinos are more likely to rely on social media than other panethnic groups, largely due to the rising share of young Latinos.⁴⁸ Due to this increased reliance on social media for political information, the group is more susceptible to misinformation. This is a critical issue for organizations like Voto Latino—seeking to mobilize and engage new voters—to consider in their social media and communication strategies. They must find ways to reach the maximum number of young Latinos while also working to combat misinformation and disinformation and build trust as a reputable information source.

These examples are all representative of what I discussed in chapter two, regarding making Latinos visible as a politically relevant and cohesive population. This trend to lean on statistical information to make claims about political representation and power began in the

⁴⁸ Sanchez.

1970s, when activists in this space were “beginning to express a demographic consciousness.”⁴⁹ Voto Latino’s communications today clearly continue this rhetorical strategy. Widening the scope of who demographically counts as Latino has implications for how we conceptualize race and ethnicity in this country, as well as implications for how we think about identity-based politics. When Voto Latino claims to work on behalf of all Latinos—and Latinos are a constantly-expanding group—then it then stands to reason that the organization also believes that it represents the political interests of this group. Therefore, the issues that Voto Latino chooses to focus on and highlight in its work as an organization speaks to its assumptions about the political preferences of Latinos—and the assumption that there is some sort of collective identity or a sense of linked fate among this population.

Finally, similar to MALDEF’s posts on this topic, Voto Latino also emphasized the importance of upholding democracy in the face of Trump. It characterized misinformation and attacks on voting access as “a threat to our democracy & equality,” and argued that the Republicans’ nomination of Trump “[undermined] the integrity of our democracy,” putting “freedom on the ballot” in the 2024 election.⁵⁰ This language creates a sense of urgency and raises the stake of the political process, and the importance of everyone’s participation. This sense of importance relates to the second sub-theme I find throughout this content.

⁴⁹ Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, *Figures of the Future: Latino Civil Rights and the Politics of Demographic Change* (Princeton: University Press, 2021), 51, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691205908>.

⁵⁰ Voto Latino, [Attacks on and misinformation about voting access], @VotoLatino, August 6, 2020; Voto Latino, [If Republicans are foolish enough to undermine], @VotoLatino, May 30, 2024; Voto Latino, [Freedom is on the ballot in November], @VotoLatino, February 29, 2024.

Individual and Collective Power

Voto Latino emphasized the importance of voting in many of its posts, because “so many in our community cannot, and are depending on us to keep their voices in mind at the polls.”⁵¹ The organization groups Latinos into a single community with the use of “our.” Its understanding of its key audience seems more developed and more bounded than perhaps MALDEF’s conception of its target demographic does, so “we” and collective language sounds more specific here. Additionally, the phrase that people are “depending on us” alludes to the fact that many Latinos are undocumented immigrants who are ineligible to vote. Particularly in recent years, as immigration has become an increasingly politicized issue, this appeal becomes more salient. Two posts highlighted individual stories that echo this theme as well. One university student said she is “not only voting for my rights, but for the rights of my family, friends, and overall, my community;” and another image showed a man holding a sticker with “I vote because I want to speak for those who cannot” written in marker.⁵² Individual agency and power are tied to the fate of the broader group, which includes a significant population of people who cannot cast a ballot.

⁵¹ Voto Latino, [So many in our community cannot], @VotoLatino, September 24, 2020.

⁵² Voto Latino, [I’m voting for the rights of my family, friends], @VotoLatino, September 25, 2024; Voto Latino, [I vote because], @VotoLatino, October 26, 2016.



Voto Latino emphasized the individual power of the vote as well, encouraging followers that “Your vote will make a difference this election!”⁵³ The impact of each person’s vote is “one of the best tools we have.”⁵⁴ Every vote matters, and the privilege and right to vote is framed as a responsibility to advocate for family and community who might not share that right and privilege. In this sense, Latinos as individuals must also be considering a wider group, and how their own interests are tied to the interest of this larger group. This kind of thinking may be behind statements like “Our voting power is huge and we have the power to sway entire elections,” and “We are proud Latinos EVERY DAY. We are also proud of our community’s voting power — which we can only flex if we actually show up and vote.”⁵⁵ This logic is also reminiscent of the literature I discussed in chapter two on linked fate and group consciousness. Scholars have debated and added caveats to the applicability of these concepts to non-Black

⁵³ Voto Latino, [Your vote will make a difference this election!], @VotoLatino, October 3, 2016.

⁵⁴ Voto Latino, [One of the best tools we have is our vote], @VotoLatino, June 22, 2020.

⁵⁵ Voto Latino, [Our voting power is huge], @VotoLatino, September 15, 2024; Voto Latino, [We are proud Latinos EVERY DAY], @VotoLatino, October 15, 2024.

groups like Latinos, but nonetheless, Voto Latino seems keen on making these appeals to mobilize its base: “Our votes have power, our stories have power, and our collective voice has power. This election season, let’s speak up, show up, and empower our communities to vote.”⁵⁶ Voting is both a means of individual empowerment and a contribution to collective change. It is a responsibility to act on behalf of those without the power of the vote, and a sense of the greater power of the group—a sum which is stronger than its individual parts.



Latino Identity and Expansive Community

Finally, I look at how this advocacy nonprofit describes Latino identity in the context of voting rights. In 2016, there is language about the Latino vote, people of colors’ vote, and young Latinos. In 2020, the organization talks about Latinx voters, communities of color, the importance of “EVERY eligible citizen,” low-income communities, Black and brown communities, working-class people of color, and “our people.” In 2024, the corpus features phrases like Latino leaders and Latino excellence. The biggest shift occurs in 2020, with more expansive language and terminology that includes other ethnoracial groups. While 2016 mentions “people of color,” most mentions are about Latinos. In the following election year,

⁵⁶ Voto Latino, [Our votes have power, our stories have power], @VotoLatino, October 22, 2024.

2020, there are significant differences in how identity is discussed. Primarily, the use of “Latinx,” which as I discussed in chapter two is not universally popular or even known and has become rather politicized. Not only does Voto Latino talk about “communities” of color and race, but it also addresses class (low-income communities)—and the intersection of these two identity markers. Using this wider variety of identity descriptors makes for a much more expansive and loosely defined vision of Latinos, which seems to be the organization’s goal—especially as that relates to appealing to and capturing younger generations of voters. In a move away from this, 2024 appears to be a middle ground between the language of 2016 and that of 2020, emphasizing solidarity and community. For example, the image below depicts a Latina Statue of Liberty with large gold hoops, a serious expression, and a fist raised in the air, surrounded by a flame patterned with the Puerto Rican flag. This was posted in the aftermath of a comedian’s racist joke about Puerto Rico at a Trump rally. This image is representative of the theme of solidarity and collective interest across the corpus.



Conclusion

My study of Voto Latino's communications helps answer the research questions I ask in this thesis. Responding to cultural shifts toward more inclusive language, Voto Latino has changed the language it uses over time. Specifically, it has expanded the kinds of terms it uses to describe Latinos in the effort to appeal to younger voters and be more gender-expansive and therefore inclusive. However, considering the public opinion data I discussed in chapter two, and the statistics that the vast majority of Latinos do not identify with—and even do not like—the terms “Latinx” and “Latine,” Voto Latino may want to reconsider its uses of these terms. If the goal is to bring in as many people as possible into the conversation in order to engage them in the political process, then using this sort of language may have the opposite effect and serve to alienate more people than it brings in. My second key finding concerns the emotional tone of Voto Latino's communications. As a voter registration nonprofit, its main goal is to engage and mobilize as many young Latinos as possible and get them out to vote. Using positive, uplifting language serves to inspire hope and enthusiasm in followers, underscore their agency and potential for change, and rally them to take action and get involved with Voto Latino's efforts.

Leading up to and following the 2024 election, media headlines were filled with stories about the Latino vote and a rightward shift toward Trump. In reality, most Latino voters supported Harris in the 2024 election by a 25-point margin.⁵⁷ Although this electorate voted overwhelmingly for Democrats, the shift toward the GOP and Trump remains significant and signals a discrepancy between Latino voters' issue priorities and what issues received campaign attention. According to the issues that Voto Latino claims to address on its website, as well as the

⁵⁷ UnidosUS, “Hispanic Voters Back Harris over Trump by a 62%-37% Margin; Cite Economic Concerns as Top Priorities,” UnidosUS, November 12, 2024, <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/hispanic-voters-back-harris-over-trump-by-a-62-37-margin-cite-economic-concerns-as-top-priorities/>.

content on its Instagram page, the organization has focused most heavily on immigration and voting rights. This discrepancy—between the issues that Voto Latino speaks on the most and the voter issue priorities—is likely something that organizations like Voto Latino should address to engage and mobilize the greatest number of voters in the future. Particularly, Voto Latino might do well to shift emphasis from immigration toward some of the more economically grounded priorities with which the Latino electorate is concerned. There is a fine line between assuming people’s interests and trying to convince them of those interests, resulting in a challenge that all identity-based advocacy nonprofits must figure out to effectively navigate.

In terms of issue areas, Voto Latino focused a lot of its attention on immigration and voting rights content, similar to MALDEF. This focus may reflect a tendency to assume the politics of its followers, and that constituents will therefore be inclined to agree with organizational platforms. Voto Latino has always catered to younger generations of Latinos, and in keeping up with this demographic, it has evolved its language and tone over time to appeal to younger Latinos. This has meant using different terminology, using Spanglish, and including salient popular culture references. In the wider context of ethnoracial identity construction, Voto Latino’s assumptive messaging when it comes to political issues, coupled with its use of gender-inclusive identity labels, may end up isolating more people than it attracts. Today, when identity politics are being blamed, in part, for the Democrats’ loss in 2024, it is important for Voto Latino to rethink the salience of Latino identity within the larger set of identities that each person holds. Particularly, paying attention to class-based identity may be important for its continued relevance and success as an identity-based advocacy nonprofit.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION — THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL MESSAGING FOR LATINOS

Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnoracial groups in the United States and constitute the second largest demographic population, surpassed only by white Americans.¹ The share of foreign-born Latinos peaked in 2000 at 40 percent and has been declining steadily since then, resulting in a growing share of US-born Latinos who are eligible to vote.² Whereas Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans historically comprised the predominant Latino groups in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the latter half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century have been marked by increasing diversity in Latinos' national origins. As the group has become less homogeneous across national, economic, and political lines, Latino identity-based advocacy nonprofits have had to grapple with how to represent and mobilize an increasingly diverse constituency. The tremendous growth and demographic shifts within the Latino community pose new challenges for organizations in this space, which I have explored through my studies of MALDEF's and Voto Latino's communications.

Overview

My analysis of these two organizations' messaging reveals several key takeaways. First, in terms of emotional content and tone, Voto Latino tends to employ a more positive and encouraging tone, even when addressing negative or harmful events. This is likely because Voto Latino's mission centers on mobilization and civic engagement—it must inspire individuals to take action. In contrast, MALDEF, as a legal advocacy organization, adopts a more serious, even

¹ Cary Funk and Mark Hugo Lopez, "A Brief Statistical Portrait of U.S. Hispanics," *Pew Research Center* (blog), June 14, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/>.

² Funk and Hugo Lopez.

grave, tone to underscore injustices and reinforce the need for its legal interventions, positioning itself as essential to addressing these issues. This framing may also serve as a strategic approach to garner public support and encourage donations.

My second central finding is that both organizations have broadened their definitions of “Latino” over time and have adjusted their language to reflect the group’s growing diversity. MALDEF initially focused on “Mexican Americans,” but over time shifted its terminology to “Hispanic” and then “Latino.” Voto Latino, from its inception, has always used the term “Latino,” but has also incorporated “Latinx” and “Latine” in its outreach. Both organizations have increasingly framed Latinos in coalition and solidarity with other marginalized communities in the US, including undocumented immigrants and Black Americans. However, this strategy may not resonate as widely as MALDEF and Voto Latino hope. For instance, the modest but significant shift toward Trump among Latinos in 2024 suggests that there are people who are most concerned with economic issues and will therefore vote for a candidate like Trump—who is against other policies they may support, like immigration reform and abortion access—simply due to economic policy. If organizations like MALDEF and Voto Latino hope to connect more effectively with Latino constituents, they may need to integrate economics and cost-of-living issues into their messaging.

My analysis of MALDEF revealed that its framing of identity shifted depending on the context. When addressing Trump, MALDEF referenced broad, collective threats to Black and Latino people, or to people of color more widely. In contrast, when discussing civil rights, its focus narrowed to Latinos specifically. This strategic modulation in language reveals how identity can be framed to serve different organizational goals and to appeal to various groups.

With regard to Latino issue priorities in 2024, while a narrow majority of Latino men believed Democrats were better suited to address their concerns, they were also more likely than Latina women to see the Republican Party as more aligned with their priorities.³ This is striking given that Latino men overwhelmingly support many immigration policies that Trump opposes, such as pathways to citizenship and family-based visa sponsorships.⁴ Public opinion data also place immigration below other priorities. Although 51 percent of Latinos say that immigration should be a top priority for the president and Congress, this is fourth on the list behind strengthening the economy (75 percent), improving the education system (66 percent), and raising employment (65 percent).⁵ Additionally, just 33 percent of Latinos say that increasing deportations would help the border situation (compared to 55 percent of other US adults), and just 26 percent of Latinos agree that expanding the southern border wall would help (compared to 45 percent of non-Latinos).⁶ If Latino men disagree with Trump’s immigration policies but are nonetheless more likely than Latina women to support his candidacy, then other factors must be influencing their decision to vote for Trump. One possibility is that support for candidates like Trump is driven less by alignment with specific policy priorities and more by affective factors—how a candidate makes voters feel and whether they perceive that candidate as representing their personal interests.

³ Gabriel Sanchez, “A Deep Dive into the 2024 Latino Male Electorate,” November 2, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-deep-dive-into-the-2024-latino-male-electorate/>. Latino men were eight percent more likely than Latina women to say that Republicans were better equipped to serve their interests than Democrats.

⁴ Sanchez.

⁵ Luis Noe-Bustamante, “Latinos’ Views on the Migrant Situation at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 4, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/03/04/latinos-views-on-the-migrant-situation-at-the-us-mexico-border/>.

⁶ Noe-Bustamante.

The rise of misinformation and disinformation further complicates this landscape. As I discussed in chapter four, Latinos are the demographic group most likely to consume all their political news from social media, making them particularly susceptible to misinformation online.⁷ One study from 2024 found that 74 percent of Americans encountered misinformation that “immigrants are taking jobs and causing an increase in unemployment for people born in the US.”⁸ Given Latinos’ media habits and news source consumption, the group’s exposure to misinformation is likely even higher. This underscores the need for organizations like MALDEF and Voto Latino craft messaging that not only is informative but also pushes back against prevalent misinformation narratives.

Both organizations have distinct visions of their audiences and assumptions about language use and cultural appeal. Voto Latino consistently includes Spanish and Spanglish in its communications, which seems to serve as a cultural appeal to younger Latinos, rather than as a way of communicating information to a wider audience. MALDEF, on the other hand, uses very little Spanish at all, despite its focus on policies like DACA, a program meant to protect foreign-born children—a group among whom only 38 percent are English proficient.⁹ This suggests that perhaps there is a disconnect between MADLEF and its audience, and an opportunity for the nonprofit to expand its linguistic accessibility to reach more of its target audience.

⁷ Gabriel R Sanchez, “Young Latino Voters in the 2024 Election” (Brookings Institution, n.d.), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Brookings-Young-Latinos-Slide-Deck_Sep12_GRS.pdf.

⁸ Gabriel Sanchez, “A Deep Dive into the 2024 Latino Male Electorate.”

⁹ Pew Research Center, “English Proficiency of Hispanic Population in the U.S., 2021,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 16, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/us-hispanics-english-proficiency/>.

Given the election results and the points I have just outlined, identity-based advocacy nonprofits may want to reconsider aspects of their messaging strategies. The imagined Latino audience behind these strategies reflects assumptions that may not hold across such a diverse population and may leave out important parts of people's identities and concerns. For example, LULAC—the oldest Latino civil rights organization—removed “Latinx” from its communications in 2021. Its president, Juan Proaño, claimed the term was ““very unliked”” by most Latinos after a poll found that 30 percent of Latino voters were less likely to support political candidates or organizations that used “Latinx.”¹⁰ He explained that as a national organization “trying to appeal to as many Latinos and Hispanics as possible,” LULAC needed to reflect the language that is actually used by most of its constituents. Similarly, critics have argued that while “Latinx” is meant to be inclusive, it “erases a crucial part of Latin American identity and language, and replaces it with an English word.”

As my analyses of Instagram content from both organizations reveal, many posts use language that seems to presume political alignment from their audiences. Messaging that implies solidarity or shared experience with other marginalized groups, or advocates for particular policy platforms, risks alienating potential supporters if it fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of Latino experiences, concerns, and politics. Voto Latino, as a civic engagement nonprofit, might benefit from grounding its messaging more firmly in the public opinion data on Latino issue priorities, particularly among younger voters. Doing so could help it foster a more inclusive strategy that informs, mobilizes, and aligns with the everyday realities of its audience without assuming they share its politics.

¹⁰ Gamboa, Suzanne, “Latino Civil Rights Organization Drops ‘Latinx’ from Official Communication,” NBC News, December 10, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latino-civil-rights-organization-drops-latinx-official-communication-rcna8203>.

MALDEF, while less reliant on mass mobilization, could also reflect on its areas of focus. By giving greater attention to economic and class-based issues—alongside its legal advocacy work—it may be able to expand its base of support and more effectively advance its mission. As Latino identities and issue priorities continue to evolve, the success of advocacy organizations will increasingly depend on their ability to adapt their messaging to reflect this complexity.

Limitations

There are limitations to my study given the timeframe of the honors thesis and my skillset as an undergraduate student. I could have included more election years in my analysis. In particular, 2010 would have been an interesting year to look at for understanding Black and Latino relations under President Obama, and how nonprofit organizations may have played up shared interests between these groups. Two thousand and twelve would also be salient to understanding the current political moment because it was the year that the Obama Administration announced the DACA program.

Another limitation was that I was not able to conduct interviews with any employees in the communications departments at these two organizations within this timeframe. When I first began this project, I had planned to interview the communications departments at MALDEF and Voto Latino. I thought that people who work professionally in communications departments could be assumed to spend considerable time thinking about and crafting the language of their organization. Therefore, they would hopefully be able to reflect on my research questions. I also thought that these key informants, having been involved in crafting the messaging of their organizations, would be able to shed light on how choices have been made over time. Future studies would benefit from including these perspectives.

Finally, a third limitation was my sample size. I ended up looking at two issue areas across three years, analyzing 65 posts per year per organization. A more robust study would have analyzed a larger sample size and additional issue areas, but given the nature of my qualitative analysis, this sample size was what was feasible for me. It would have also been interesting to analyze additional organizations. When I began my research for this project, I was researching organizations like UnidosUS (formerly National Council of La Raza) and LULAC. Both organizations are also national in scope and well-established in this space.

UnidosUS was formerly called the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) but changed its name in July of 2017. The NCLR began in 1968 in Phoenix, Arizona as the Southwest Council of La Raza before changing its name to NCLR in 1972 and moving its national headquarters to Washington, DC. It has an affiliate network of over 300 community-based organizations across the country that make up its main constituency. I would be interested in the name change from “La Raza” (The Race) to “Unidos US” (United US). The organization covers a broad range of issues (i.e., education, health, immigration, racial equity, voting and political empowerment), and tends to use the term “Hispanic” in its communications. The hope of analyzing this organization would be to see where MALDEF and UnidosUS negotiated Latino identity differently, as both were established in the same year and in the same geographic region.

LULAC was established in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas, making it the oldest (and largest) Latino organization in the country, boasting nearly 140,000 members. Its national office is in Washington, DC, and it also has offices in El Paso and Dallas. Its work centers on community-based programming that addresses economic conditions, education, political power, health, housing, and civil rights. This work is spread across the 500 LULAC councils around the country. LULAC serves “all Hispanic nationality groups.”¹¹ This case study may speak to the

¹¹ LULAC, “About Us,” accessed April 13, 2025, <https://lulac.org/about/>.

historical aspects of my research questions. Again, the use of language is particularly interesting, as “Hispanic” was the precursor for “Latino” in the construction of the panethnic ethnoracial category. Including these organizations in an expanded analysis would provide richer insights into the research questions I ask and a more robust sense of the organizational landscape.

Looking Forward: Scholarly Implications

Communicating to a changing and increasingly diverse group, such as Latinos, presents a rich area of research with significant potential for further exploration. At the time of this study, there are no widely accepted best practices for conducting text analyses of Instagram posts within this field. The intersection of Latino identity, politics, and social media communication is critical to understanding how ethnoracial identity is constructed and negotiated in America, as well as for analyzing patterns of Latino political behavior and the evolving role of identity-based advocacy nonprofits in these processes.

By linking the historical construction of Latino identity to contemporary nonprofit communication strategies, my research contributes to a broader understanding of how ethnoracial identity has developed and evolved over time in the United States, and how it has been mobilized to achieve political purposes. In doing so, it offers insight into the ways Latino identity has been shaped and reshaped to serve organizational and political goals over time.

Implications for the Future

In February 2025, a Miami public school teacher and DACA beneficiary was deported to Honduras after a routine immigration appointment.¹² He had been in the US since he was 13 years old and was 24 at the time of his deportation. In light of the continued attacks on

¹² Hatzel Vela, “Miami-Dade Teacher Deported to Honduras After Being Detained at Immigration Check-Up,” *NBC 6 South Florida* (blog), February 7, 2025, <https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/miami-dade-teacher-deported-by-ice-after-being-detained-at-immigration-check-up/3538525/>.

immigration programs, DACA recipients and supporters are increasingly concerned about the fate of the program under Trump. Since returning to office, Trump has renewed threats to immigrant protections. In March 2025, his administration published a notice terminating Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for over 500,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans.¹³ TPS is designed to offer legal relief to people fleeing humanitarian crises in their home countries, helping reduce unauthorized border crossings by providing other legal alternatives.¹⁴ Although many Latinos support programs like DACA—and although most Americans believe in pathways to citizenship for adult recipients of DACA—Trump does not.

Trump's presidency introduces new political, legal, and financial challenges for organizations that represent and mobilize Latinos. Historically, MALDEF has been a critical defender of immigrants' rights, and some of its signature achievements, like the Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe* (which guaranteed free public K-12 education regardless of immigration status) and its ongoing defense of DACA, will come under threat. These political developments heighten the importance of Voto Latino's work to mobilize Latinos as well, and underscore both the urgency and difficulty of combatting the growing spread of misinformation on social media, where many Latinos receive their political information.

At the same time, these organizations must recognize that immigration is not the top priority for all Latinos. Not all Latinos experience a sense of linked fate—the belief that their individual interests are inherently tied to the interests of the broader ethnoracial group—or prioritize immigration-related policy above other concerns. Ethnoracial identities are not fixed;

¹³ Department of Homeland Security, "Termination of Parole Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans," March 25, 2025, <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2025-05128.pdf>.

¹⁴ Camilio Montoya-Galvez, "U.S. to Revoke Legal Status of More Than a Half-Million Migrants, Urges Them to Self Deport," March 23, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-to-revoke-legal-status-of-over-a-half-million-migrants-chnv/>.

they are ongoing projects and continue to change over time. As a result, their salience in American politics changes, too. Organizations that center around a specific facet of identity—such as Latinidad—are actively engaged in raising the salience of that identity. However, to remain relevant and persuasive, these nonprofits must also account for the significance of other aspects of identity, particularly class-based experiences, economic circumstances, and educational backgrounds. To build broader support among Latino constituents, organizations must engage with the policy areas that are most important to the everyday lives of their constituents and integrate these concerns more fully into their overarching missions.

Although Latinos have voted majority-Democratic in recent elections, each of the past three national election cycles has uncovered a further shift to the right. Organizations like MALDEF and Voto Latino must therefore reflect on their communication strategies to ensure that they are persuading new voters and bringing in the next generation, while also taking care not to alienate huge swaths of the Latino electorate with overly assumptive language or narrowly framed rhetoric. Greater attentiveness to the policy priorities held by most Latinos would be beneficial to aligning these organizations' work with the needs of the population they aim to represent, while also staying true to their core missions.

In particular, these nonprofits must find new ways to reach Latinos who prioritize the economy and cost of living above all else and convince this subpopulation that other policies advanced by anti-immigrant and right-wing politicians may ultimately undermine their long-term interests. Making stronger connections between immigration policy and the self-interest of US-born or securely documented Latinos will be crucial to advancing a progressive policy platform, without leaving economically concerned voters behind.

Voto Latino has succeeded in putting forward a cohesive and modern brand image that appeals to younger, technologically savvy generations. MALDEF would benefit from updating its own branding and investing more heavily in its social media presentation. As I mentioned earlier, Latinos are the demographic group that receives the largest proportion of political information from social media, meaning that curated, engaging digital content is essential to reaching as many people as possible, and to combating misinformation.

My analysis of MALDEF and Voto Latino addresses my research questions by uncovering how and why their messaging about Latino identity has evolved, and by illustrating how their focus on particular issues reflects their assumptions about Latino political preferences. The larger question animating my research is how these practices inform our understanding of the construction of ethnoracial identity in America. The fact that MALDEF's and Voto Latino's messaging has changed over time reflects the temporally dynamic nature of ethnoracial identity. Different political actors have mobilized such identities to varying ends, and the salience of these identities has ebbed and flowed with time. While identity politics has become a part of the mainstream, recent years have also seen growing backlash against it. Trump and the MAGA movement can, in part, be understood as a reactionary response to identity-based advocacy.

Prioritizing gender-inclusivity, framing Latino identity as politically salient, and centering immigration and voting rights are all worthwhile and important goals, and yet these emphases have often come at the expense of the policy areas which the majority of Latinos' rank most important. Namely, the state of the economy and issues with cost of living and employment. This signals an urgent need for these kinds of organizations to lend more focus to questions of class identity and economic well-being.

Although there is no widely accepted definition of class, Latinos are statistically more likely to be working class than middle class. Using college attainment as a proxy, 79 percent of Latinos fit into the working-class category in 2021.¹⁵ Political scientist Ruy Teixeira reveals the significant political differences between working-class and middle-class Latinos. In 2020, working-class Latinos shifted toward Trump by 19 points, while college-educated Latinos moved only nine points.¹⁶ For the first time, Democrats performed better with college-educated Latinos than their working-class counterparts. In the lead-up to the election in 2024, Biden was polling just one point ahead of Trump among working-class Latinos—but was up by 39 points with college-educated Latinos.¹⁷ Teixeira notes that 70 percent of working-class Latinos reported being moderate or conservative, compared to over half of college-educated Latinos who said they were liberal.¹⁸

There is a tremendous opportunity for advocacy organizations to revise their communication strategies with these dynamics in mind. In 2024, a lack of policy platforms addressing the economic realities facing most Americans, combined with alienation from the feeling that the national discussion overemphasized ethnoracial identity, meant that many Latinos who might have been persuaded by groups like MALDEF and Voto Latino instead moved in the other direction.

¹⁵ Lauren Mora, “Hispanic Enrollment Reaches New High at Four-Year Colleges in the U.S., but Affordability Remains an Obstacle,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 7, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/>.

¹⁶ Ruy Teixeira, “Postcard from the Hispanic Working Class,” *American Enterprise Institute* (blog), April 26, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/postcard-from-the-hispanic-working-class/>.

¹⁷ Teixeira.

¹⁸ Teixeira.

These organizations have to navigate complex tensions as Latino identity continues to evolve. Political identity is not shaped solely by ethnoracial identity; it is also informed by economic experience, class position, and educational background. Advocacy organizations must figure out how to situate themselves effectively within these ongoing changes. While they cannot control the salience of ethnoracial identity in national politics at any given moment, they can be more attentive to its changing nature and the variety of factors that influence political behavior. Identity-based advocacy groups should treat their communication strategies as iterative, adaptive projects, particularly as the Latino population continues to grow and diversify. Recognizing the dynamic nature of ethnoracial identity and the complexity of Latino identity is essential to building broader coalitions and creating more inclusive strategies for political representation.

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